

AT
LIBERTY
TO
LOVE



CARYL
McADOO



**At Liberty
to Love**

Book Seven 1865-1866

**CARYL
McADOO**

Praying my story gives God glory!

All of Caryl's Books

Historical Christian Texas Romances

Vow Unbroken - 1832 / *Hearts Stolen* - 1839-1844
Hope Reborn - 1850-51 / *Sins of the Mothers* - 1851-53
Daughters of the Heart - 1853-54 / *Just Kin* - 1861-65
At Liberty to Love – 1865-66

Contemporary Christian

Red River Romances - *The Preacher's Faith* / *Sing a New Song* / *One and Done*

Apple Orchard Romances - *Lady Luck's a Loser*

Biblical Fiction

The Generations - *A Little Lower Than the Angels* / *Then the Deluge Comes* / *Replenish the Earth* / *Children of Eber*

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River Bottom Ranch Stories-*The Adventures of Sergeant Socks: The Journey Home*, bk 1 / *The Bravest Heart*, bk 2 / *Amazing Graci, Guardian of the River Bottom Goats*, bk 3

Days of Dread Trilogy - *The King's Highway*, bk 1

Miscellaneous Novels

The Thief of Dreams > > > **Warning: not written for Christians!** / *The Price Paid* / *Absolute Pi* (audio > secular; mild language) / *Apple Orchard B&B* (now *Lady Luck's a Loser*)

Non-fiction

Great Firehouse Cooks of Texas / *Antiquing in North Texas* / *Story & Style, The Craft of Writing Creative Fiction*

Five-Star reviews

At Liberty to Love

At Liberty To Love shows how God can speak through dreams, visions and small children. As God spoke in biblical times, so He can still speak that way today. There are some wonderful exchanges of dialogue with four year old Michael. Caryl McAdoo demonstrates the power of trust and faith. "Nothing was too hard for God" Who shows

that He loves to step in and make the seemingly impossible, possible.
Another great offering from Caryl McAdoo.

--Julia Wilson, Worcester, England reader

I've followed Henry Buckmeyer and his family since the first book, "Vow Unbroken" and couldn't wait for this one. Could this be the true love the widow has never known before? *At Liberty To Love* as always, gives glory to God. All Caryl McAdoo's stories are uplifting and truly enjoyable. I highly recommend this one and all of the stories in the Texas Romance series.

--Michele Beach, Clinton, New York reader

With characters that charm, and scenes that tug at our heart strings, Caryl McAdoo keeps us reading well past our bedtimes. Mrs. McAdoo has woven yet another Texas tall tale to keep us flipping pages. The mistress of the Texas yarn, her Texas dialect tantalizes from start to finish. *At Liberty to Love* made this reviewer fall in love with fictional people who seem so real that they almost breathe. This character-driven, well-crafted novel is a keeper. I'm adding it to my collection of Texas Romances by Caryl McAdoo.

--Cass Wessel, Tionesta, Pennsylvania multi-published devotion author

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, places, characters, and events are products of the author's imaginations, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

Though a bit out of the ordinary, I'd like to dedicate this book to a wonderful group of ladies who have so blessed my life and those will be my many Heart"wings" sisters who embraced me, supported me, encouraged me, and loved me.

There's no way I can name
you all, but I must mention
our Heart"wings" founder
and leader Joyce Graves who
I've come to love, and there's
Patricia, my two Sandys, the

Heart"wings"!

So... to



Danele, Bonnie, Heather, Toni, Julia, Ann, DiAne, Elaine, Toni, Anusha, Julie, Connie, Helen, Susan, Nancy, Anita, Sarah, Holly, Janis, Karen, and so many more! God is bonding hearts there daily.

We'd love to have you, too! Just let me know you'd like to join!

Acknowledgements

Because of what You've done for me, I'll praise Your Holy Name forever. I long to wear Your wedding ring; oh purify this humble bride, so that when You come, I'll be ready, pure and spotless, my lamp full of oil. At the sound of the trump, I'll meet You in the sky and join the Marriage Feast! One with You! Oh Glory! One with You! No one else in Heaven or Earth's as True. What a celebration! Oh, the bliss when You impart Your Holy kiss! (lyrics of a new song He gave me) I love You, Father God!

I love you, too, Ron. Thank you for fifty years together! Only forty-eight married since for two of those, we were still in high school and our parents were so fickle.☐) Thank you for making my life so wonderful and for loving me so well. I so enjoy your presence.

Each time my new release is a Texas Romance, I owe a big shout out to Kirk DouPonce of Dog Eared Design for creating my beautiful covers. They are all so exquisite. I thank God for you, Kirk!

My proofreader has become my sister-friend, too. I'm so grateful God gave me Lenda Selph, and that her sweet husband Terry lets her spend so much time on my books. You're such a blessing to me, dear lady...as are Louise Koiner, Cassandra Wessel and Michelle Beach for their help on this one, too. I'm always tickled that everyone catches different oopsies.

And I love to acknowledge my readers because without you, where would my stories be? I guess in my computer and the cyber space cloud...wherever that is.☐ I appreciate you buying my novels, telling your friends, leaving all those wonderful reviews, clicking 'Share' and 'Like' on Facebook, and your tweeting, too. I pray God blesses you and gives you favor for being such blessings to me.



Clarksville, Texas, October 2, 1865

“Are you sure about this?”

Rebecca nodded. “Yes, Daddy. I’ve considered every angle and studied long and hard on it. I’m certain, and my mind is made up.”

He closed his eyes as though he couldn’t stand watching her leave. “I hate it.”

A chuckle threatened, but he was being so pathetic. She swallowed the giggle. “I know, but don’t worry. I’ll be back before you know it.”

His lids lifted, then he leaned in a bit and lowered his voice. “You’ve got both Derringers?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you’re wearing the petticoat Laura made you?”

Mother May punched his arm. “Henry, leave her be. She’s a grown woman.”

“Mercy, baby. I hate this.”

“You’ve already said that, Daddy.”

Movement caught her eye. The driver hustled from the stage’s boot up to the front then climbed aboard next to the guard. “Looks like he’s ready to go, and that I’m his only hold-up.”

“Don’t mind him.”

She reached up and kissed his cheek then hugged Mother May. “I love you both.”

More hugs and kisses followed. One each for her to pass along to all the west coast clan. She thought they might never stop, but soon found herself waving from her window until the dust cloud blocked her view.

Hard even for her to believe it, but there she was. Really doing it. A big part of her heart remained on the boardwalk in front of the

Donoho with her parents.

Except they weren't, not really. Neither one of them.

From the first, she'd known that God sent Henry Buckmeyer in answer to her prayers. And her perfect daddy proved to be the perfect husband for her mother, too. What a trip lay ahead!

Traveling over the exact same ground as in '32 where she'd almost immediately fallen in love with her stepfather. But she'd never thought of him that way, not since the beginning.

Why, she'd been calling him Daddy from the second day on the Jefferson Trace.

Good thing her mother said yes when he asked her...even though she really shouldn't have since he wasn't saved yet. The man had captured her heart by then though, and blurting out 'yes' kept everything in God's plan.

A smile crossed her lips remembering her own husband. Daddy always claimed he would never have proposed to Mama again if she'd turned him down that first time.

But Wallace? He'd asked Rebecca more than a hundred times at the least. He would never have quit until she agreed to marry, that was for sure and for certain.

The landscape hadn't changed much, but the means of travel definitely progressed. Back then, two mules could only pull a loaded wagon about ten miles a day. Twelve or thirteen took some doing.

The stage covered the same distance in an hour. She loved it. But like Mama, still hated the dust and the coach's swaying and bumping.

"Going far?"

She looked up.

On the far bench, a matron smiled, sitting next to what appeared to be her husband.

"Yes, ma'am. On my way to California."

"Oh, dear, sweetheart. You're going the wrong way."

She smiled. "I know, but I've chosen to take the easy route even though it's a bit longer. I've loved riding steamboats since only a girl."

"Oh, I see. We're staying in Mount Pleasant a few days. Louie, here..." She patted the man's hand. "He's a watchmaker, and we figured he can find a week's worth of work, maybe longer."

"Yes, ma'am. Titus County has certainly grown. If you get by Mister Andrew's Trading Post, please tell him Rebecca Buckmeyer sent her love."

"I'd be pleased to."

"He's an old friend."

In the next three hours, she learned way more about the couple than she ever wanted to know, but the conversation helped pass the time, and she'd only brought three novels...not that Jefferson and

New Orleans didn't have stores that stocked books.

She could hardly wait to get into Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. She'd been saving it.

At Mount Pleasant, the couple said their goodbyes and promised to visit the Titus Trading Post. A man dressed in an ill-fitting corduroy suit climbed aboard, taking the window seat on the opposite bench.

The driver hollered for all to board, but no one else did. Leather snapped, and at his "Ho!" the coach lurched forward, pushing her back into the seat. The oversized wheels turned. They'd be fun to ride up as she had on the trace when she was nine.

Grown, though, she could understand her mother's horror at her fearless feat. The thought brought a giggle, and she immediately glanced at the gentleman who appeared to be ignoring her. Fine with her.

She went for a hankie to cover her mouth, slipping her hand in her purse.

A wave of unease washed over her.

Instead of the lacey handkerchief, her fingers found the Derringer's trigger, and she positioned her clutch so that the gun's barrel pointed right at the stranger. Daddy would be proud.

Not that the new passenger seemed all that threatening. Rather, he reminded her of someone she knew, although she couldn't quite put her finger on who.

Still...better safe than sorry. That's what Mama always said.

What had it been? Almost twenty-one years. Guess she'd never quit missing her.

The position proved uncomfortable, trying to read with one hand in her purse. Not to mention all the bumping and swaying.

And though the man looked her way now and again, he'd neither said nor done anything to suggest he meant her harm. She chocked her anxiousness up to traveling alone for the first time ever in her forty-two years.

Adjusting to lean against her corner, she changed the book from her left hand to the right and went back to reading.

A bit before Daingerfield, the man tapped the bench.

She looked up. He stared, and she matched his gaze, but holding it proved a bit difficult for his blue eyes were deep and threatened to pull her in.

He grinned. "I should have known it, first thing."

Thankful for the speech to break the temptation to fall into those azure pools, she couldn't resist responding. "And what would that be?"

"You're Rebecca Rusk."

"Do I know you, sir?"

“No, but I know you, well, in a roundabout way.” He tipped the bowler. “Condolences, ma’am, on your husband’s demise. He sure didn’t tell the half of it.”

“I’m sorry. To what are you referring?”

“Your beauty. Wallace and Levi never missed a chance to brag on your looks.”

She made her eyes return to her book, the man’s baritone much too melodious to encourage. Her cheeks warmed, and his words tugged at the piece of her heart Wallace’s stubbornness had scarred.

Despite her resolve not to, she looked up. “How is it you know my husband and brother?”

“I served in General Buckmeyer’s regiment.” A finger brushed the short brim of his silly-looking hat. “Major Ford at your service.”

“Thought you were a colonel?”

“No, that’s my cousin Rip.”

“You have a given name?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He grinned again, flashing his perfect teeth. “Are Bart and Houston well, doing good?”

“They are.” The man had her at a disadvantage. She stiffened her back and stared right into his baby blues. “Where are you headed, Major?”

“Nashville. I’ve applied at the university there.”

“Oh, I see.” Mixed emotions roiled inside. A part of her relieved that at Jefferson he’d be going north, yet another was disappointed he wouldn’t be. “So you’re going back to finish your education now that the war is over? Very commendable.”

“No, ma’am. Offering my services in mathematics or Latin, perhaps both. Doesn’t matter what I teach.”

His rich, soothing tone washed over her, followed with a refreshing wave of his eloquent words. She had to look away. A man of letters. Yet he wore such an ill-fitting suit and ridiculous hat.

Glancing back his way, she eyed him. “If I may suggest... perchance...might you’d consider more appropriate dress prior to your interview?”

He snickered. “Not everyone is as well-heeled as your father.”

“True.” Her words had no ill effect on the man, as if he deemed what he wore of no consequence—much the same as what he would be teaching. Did the man care about anything? “Perhaps you should have come to Clarksville first. Daddy would have loaned you money for a new suit and a proper hat.”

Without a hitch in that smile of his, he removed the bowler and flung the silly thing out the open window. “Shall I toss the suit as well?”

“No, of course not.” She searched the page for her place then

looked right back up, cheeks warm again. “Well...do you have another?”

“I do not, but if you’re so concerned that my attire might dampen my chances at employment, perhaps trousers and a cotton shirt would win the day.”

Before she could answer, the driver blew the bugle outside the town that had sprung up around Captain Daingerfield’s spring. “I’ve got needle and thread in my bag. Alterations could make a big difference.”

Why had she said that? Sewing on the stage would most likely prick every fingertip and only get blood all over his only suit, making things worse.

But how could she not help one of Wallace’s comrades-in-arms?

Maybe ignoring that she’d mentioned it would accomplish its purpose. She’d fetch her kit in case it did not.

“Well, I do thank you for your condolences, sir.”



The stay in Daingerfield allowed Ford an opportunity to change. If the lady could improve the second-hand suit he’d found in Dallas, then why not?

Back in his seat with the stage once again heading south, he handed over the corduroy coat first. “The pants are not too bad.”

Rebecca took his offering. “Hold out your arm, fingers straight out.”

He complied, reaching across the center bench. “Thank you again, Mis’ess Rusk.”

She spread her cloth tape measure from his shoulder to his wrist. Her fingers touched his skin lightly. Sent a warmth straight to his heart, but he kept a straight face, a bit disappointed she hadn’t told him to call her Rebecca.

Wait! He knew. “Marcus Aurelius.”

She smiled, the first offered, and his heart skipped a beat. “What about him?”

“My given name. You see, my mother...” He shrugged, shouldn’t speak poorly of the dead. “Bless her pea picking heart, the woman loved the last good emperor of Rome.”

“Marcus Ford.” She smiled again even bigger this time. “Rebecca Baylor Buckmeyer Rusk. Pleased to meet you, sir.”

“I prefer Major, if you don’t mind.”

“But why, pray tell? There’s not a thing wrong with Marcus, or even Mark. It’s a strong name. Though I can understand steering clear

of that middle moniker.” She smiled again, and he practically swooned.

My, quite surprising the effect the beautiful lady had on him. He sure never expected it...of her or any other woman. If he didn’t know better, he’d think himself downright smitten. But that couldn’t be.

Though the desire to tell her his life grew with each breath, he considered it wise to keep his tongue. “Long story. Perhaps when you’re grown, I’ll enlighten you.”

She snickered. “You, sir, are nothing more than a flirt. Or either blind. My youth has long since faded.”

His lips curled into a smirk, almost the same one he hated on his sister’s mug, but the practiced expression had served him well. “You must have married very young, dear lady. I doubt you’ve seen twenty and five winters in your short and obviously protected life.”

The flush of her cheeks rewarded his little truth stretching. He pegged her age somewhere close to his own, but what female didn’t enjoy being mistaken to be younger? Her appearance...

Suffice it to say that the classic beauty he beheld far outshone any he’d laid eyes upon before.

“Um hum.” She worked at cutting the coat’s second shoulder seam, and didn’t look up. “You know, Major, that lying will send you to hell same as stealing.”

“Methodist?”

That won him a glance. Her eyes sparkled so. “Yes, as a matter of fact. And you, Major? What is your faith?”

That time, he would not lie. “There’s a God out there somewhere, ma’am. I’m convinced of that fact. But to my way of thinking, He doesn’t reside in any church building of which I’ve darkened the door.”

She nodded. Her lips thinned in contemplation as she returned to her alterations, expertly threading a needle.

For a mile or better, she remained silent, and sewed, then looked up. “I’m on my way to San Francisco and should be away less than a year. If perchance, you find yourself in Texas again, I would love taking you to our meetings. The Lord is definitely there. Of that, I am convinced.”

The stories Wallace told were true. His widow was all he’d said and more.

“Perhaps, I’ll make a point of that. Least I could do to repay you for altering my suit.” He grinned. “Actually, I’ve got a list of questions I’d like to ask the man upstairs.”



In no position to speak for the Lord, Rebecca refused the bait. She'd read the Bible numerous times cover to cover. Still, the few times she'd tried to debate God's word, the scripture she knew and wanted stayed just out of her reach.

So instead of getting into it with the handsome stranger, she concentrated on her alterations. Best she could anyway. The man's stare proved a bit unsettling.

"Do you know? And if you do, can you tell me?"

Clearing her throat, she bade more time. "What was it you asked again?" She marked her spot and looked up at him.

He grinned. "What I said was the continuation of a conversation I've been having over here amongst me, myself and I."

Blasted blue eyes! She hated herself for it. He'd only think she was encouraging his Tom Foolery, but keeping her lips from smiling proved more impossible than refusing her eyes the pleasure of his face.

Despite her every effort not to, she played along.

"Back up, kind sir, and tell me what it is you want to know. I may or may not have your answer, and if I do, I am in no way compelled to give it."

His face turned serious. "Understood. That first year we crossed the Mississippi, we were on our way east. Had one encounter with the Yank and bested them, save we lost a few good men. Two days later, your daddy led us right back to San Antonio. Never heard a word as to the how it happened or the why."

"I'm sorry, how could I possibly know?"

"Let me finish, ma'am." He grinned again and his eye twinkled so bright it took her breath. How ridiculous. "Levi and Rip were mum like they both knew, but refused to answer any questions. Wallace and I were about as dumbfounded as a calf at a new gate. How we got the

plum posting, we couldn't figure."

Wasn't too plum for her. "Daddy certainly never said anything to me about it. So I repeat, I don't know."

"Were you aware that the General profited from selling the cotton?"

The coach swayed a bit more than normal, and she grabbed the windowsill to steady herself. Her cheeks warmed. "Are you calling my father a profiteer?"

The Major shrugged. "You said that like it's a bad word. He took the risk. Why shouldn't he make some coin?"

The better question remained, why hadn't she ever heard about any of this? "What risk? Explain yourself."

"Once the cotton reached Mexico, he bought it then paid for it to be shipped to England. If not for Henry Buckmeyer, the Confederacy's treasury would've suffered considerably."

Looking to her sewing, she discovered she'd totally lost her place. Glancing back at the man, she took it that he was only relaying information, not being judgmental. But he hadn't answered her need for explanation. "So to what risk do you refer?"

"Once the lint reached Mexico, it belonged to him to sale. But those Yanks were doing everything in their power to either steal it or destroy it. Did you know he had three thousand bales in Laredo when the Blue Coats attacked?"

A chill washed over her. "Are you saying, sir, that my husband got shot protecting Daddy's cotton?"

An offhanded nod thrown indicated he hadn't put it all together just that way before. "Oh no, ma'am. I'm not saying that at all. The Yankees had invaded Texas. You did hear what Sherman's cutthroats did on their little jaunt to the sea, right?"

She had. And if only half of the reports would prove true, it was horrific. Of its own, her head bobbed, while she still did her best to assimilate that Wallace died protecting stupid cotton—no matter how many bales. "Yes, I heard. Didn't he call it total war?"

"Exactly. We couldn't allow them to get a foothold here anymore than we could let them stop the cotton trains."

His logic soothed her ruffled feathers, but Wallace's stubbornness still troubled her. He could be with her this minute if he would just have let them take his leg. Better even, kept his head down and not stood when he did.

Tears threatened, but she'd fought that battle too many times.

Her husband wasn't there, and nothing would change that.

Concentrating on her mending again, she stared, couldn't seem to remember what she'd planned to do next. Or even where she'd thrown the last stitch. Why was she doing this anyway?

Where was the Major's wife...or mother for that matter? She blinked until the moisture retreated, then glimpsed up. "Where's your wife, Marcus?"



Ford smiled his best do-what-I-ask grin. "Major, please."

"No. You're no longer in the service, so it's Marcus or Ford, but I refuse to call you by your previous rank. Are you going to answer my question? Any of them?"

Normally, sass-mouthed females put him off, but not so the Widow Rusk. It appeared he'd wounded her pride, and she needed a bit of solace.

With most folks, he would only offer that she and his baby girl were in New Orleans, but not with Rebecca. She'd know he wasn't telling the whole of it. "She's dead. The fever got her and our baby girl."

His words considerably softened her countenance. "Oh, dear. Mercy. I am so sorry."

"Thank you, but it happened years ago." He studied his fingernails a bit. Didn't want to talk about his dead. Something she'd said before came to mind. "Why are you going to San Francisco?"

She set his coat in her lap and shook her head as if shaking the thoughts of death away. "Visiting. I haven't seen my sisters since before the war."

Though certain there was more to it, he'd not pry. Except, he really would like to know if she was off to reunite with an old beau, or meet someone new. A respectable time had passed. "Mary Rachel, Gwendolyn Belle, Cecilia Carol and Bonnie Claire, right?"

"Even their middle names? How'd you know?"

"Wallace and I shared barracks."

"How did that come about? Why didn't my husband and brother bunk together?"

"We were Majors. Rip, Levi, and your daddy got private quarters. We lesser lights had to double up." He lifted both shoulders. "On the other hand, Wallace spent the lion's portion of his time with Levi and the General. Way more than me. But we had our share of long nights, and the man loved bragging on you and your family."

She snorted. Not very ladylike, but then her widowhood had been brought about by Wallace's pride. He knew that full well. And that Rusk harbored tons more pride at being a part of her clan than his own.

A lesser woman might have spit—or worse—in the same situation.

Might “smitten” be the right word for the hot blood pulsing through his veins?

“What else?” Why had he just blurted that out?

“Sir, you need to rehearse your words more carefully. Now please back up and rephrase.”

Wallace was right, except he didn’t tell all of it. How could a member of the weaker sex be able to take a man’s soul captive with a look? He loved her confidence to confront any matter, but burned to match her, best her.

“San Francisco. There’s more to your going than a visit, isn’t there?”

She glared like he’d touched a sore spot. “Why would you ever think that?”

Answering a question with one of her own. He grinned inside, but kept a straight face. A very sore spot.

“Going to look up a past suitor? Wallace crowed that every eligible bachelor in the state came calling at one time or another before he wore you down.”

“Is your mother dead, too?”

The straight face came much harder. What a match! He nodded, but no need to exhume his dear ma. “Why do you ask?”

“Because of your manners, sir! I’d presume that she’s been gone a long while, for you are most definitely in need of someone to give you a refresher course.”

That time he chuckled aloud. Couldn’t hold it in anymore. “Yes, ma’am. Suppose I do speak my mind more than polite society usually allows. But then they never have dictated my actions. And again, on the other side of the creek, verbal jousting with a peer is one of my most favorite pastimes.”

Her lips thinned a fraction. “So. You’ve elevated yourself to peerage. Perhaps more appropriate attire would positively be in order then.”

“Indeed.” He held out his hand.

“What?”

“The coat, please.”

She shrugged and handed the thing over. He took it and flung it out the window. “You’re right. I do need new threads.”

“My needle....”



Rebecca bit her cheek. Though incorrigible, the man proved entertaining at the least. And quite handsome if one could get beyond

his deficiency of proper manners. "Probably for the best. No doubt, it was beyond my limited abilities."

"I don't know about that. Your stitches looked tight and sure to me."

The bugle sounded, announcing the stage's pending arrival at Hickory Hill, the last change before Jefferson. She scooted to the edge of her seat. "Seems to me there's a dry goods here. Let's see if they have ready-made."

"No need. If the dean is put off by my dress, then teaching in Nashville is not in the cards for me."

"No, don't say that."

Ford chuckled. "Why not? What social blunder have I just flawlessly executed?"

The stage eased to a stop. Rebecca waited for the dust to settle, opened the door, then turned toward him. "I will enlighten you after we resume our journey." Without waiting for a reply or a helping hand, she climbed down and made her way to the privy.

With barely a quick run through the dry goods store, she frowned at the driver blowing his blasted bugle. The single coat offered was too fancy and somewhat threadbare. Marcus needed a new tailor-made suit for his interview, and if she didn't see to it... The least she could do for one of Wallace's boon buddies.

But how? Only his inflated sense of self-worth eclipsed the man's obvious pride.

He stood at the stage's open door. She took his hand and used it to climb aboard. Like a true gentleman he had offered with his fingers turned down, but even as such, a warmth spread from his hand to her heart.

What a strange occurrence. She took her seat then turned sideways as he jumped in then flopped on the cross bench, rocking the coach.

What a contradiction, genteel one moment, then like a spoiled child showing out to garner attention the next.

He grinned at her, as though he'd just read her thoughts and found them humorous.

Reins cracked over the horses' backs, trace chains clanged, and the oversized wheels turned as the stage embarked on its last leg to Jefferson.

"Enlighten me."

She shook her head. Why did he insist on not bringing her into his conversations until mid-thought? "As to what, Marcus?"

"From your lips I don't abhor my given name, but at least sparingly, please. Let me adjust. Besides, don't you think Major has a better ring to it?"

“You, sir, are insufferable. I will keep your given name to a minimum, but using your previous rank as a moniker is not an option for me. Now back to what do you want...oh, yes, I remember now. Regarding you saying that something wasn’t in the cards. You shouldn’t chalk things, good or bad, up to luck. There’s no such thing.”

He knocked his knuckles on the wooden bench separating them, grinned his bad boy smile, then shrugged. “So? A little more enlightenment, fair maid? If not luck, what is there? Happenstance? Good fortune? Or maybe fate?”

“None of those. There are only blessings and curses. There is no god of fortune, contrary to what Julius Caesar and his ilk believed.”

“Ever read his commentaries?”

“Daddy read them to us.”

“What translation?”

“His own; he’d throw in enough Latin along the way that we all can muddle our way through.”

“Interesting. He never mentioned he knew Latin. So back to luck. Are you saying God is pulling everyone’s strings? That we’re nothing more than a bunch of puppets?”

“Of course not. No. He gives us free will...along with the desires of our hearts.”



Since she’d brought it up, over the last leg to Jefferson, Ford tried to discuss religion, but the lady would not engage. He refrained from using his most potent weapon, and instead, got her to talking about her childhood.

Though he’d heard much of it from Wallace, but Rebecca’s telling proved way more entertaining. Just the sound of her voice would have been enough, but having the liberty to drink in her beauty as she talked...

Sweeter than any dessert that had ever touched his lips.

As the stage neared its destination, he carried her from the past back to the present. “Are you booked already for the next leg of your journey?”

“Yes, I sail tomorrow.”

“Per chance you might dine with me tonight. I have a layover myself.”

She beamed, then a sly twinkle flashed. “I accept. On two conditions.”

Had he ever met such a woman? “Agreed.”

Her laughter brightened his soul. “You haven’t even heard them yet.”

“Doesn’t matter. Your company will be worth the price.”



She shot him her little girl smile. “Seems a third boon is in order then.”

Ford nodded. “Indeed, but curiosity has bested me. What are your two conditions, and this bonus benefit?”

“First, I would like the suit trousers.” Giving him the eye, she clucked, shaking her head slightly. “I still can’t believe you threw the coat out the window.”

“But you said –”

“Still, a stitch or twelve might make the pants acceptable, especially without the stage’s constant sway. Plus, it would help pass my afternoon.” She held her hand toward his grip.

Fishing out the pants, he handed them over. After all, he had agreed.

“Next...” The bugle sounded, and she waited for quiet. “I pay. Or rather Henry Buckmeyer pays for our meal. It’s the least he can do for one of his former junior officers.”

“The General isn’t here.”

“His coin is though. He slipped me some mad money on my way out and told me to enjoy myself.” She glanced out the window with a budding grin, then let it blossom when she looked back. “And you, sir, are a breath of fresh air.”

What a vision! He tipped his hat, except it wasn’t there. Seemed he’d tossed the thing the way of his suit coat. “Thank you, ma’am, glad you think so. What’s the boon?”

“If you’ll be so kind as to see me and my luggage to the steamer. Unlike my father, I don’t travel light.”

Navigating the three blocks from the stage depot to the docks, he rehearsed her words. Couldn’t ever remember being called a breath of fresh air, but he certainly liked it. On her lips, the compliment lifted his spirit to the moon.

Fresh? Indeed. Outspoken? Even brash at times. Never practiced holding his tongue.

Had the widow Rusk seen past his flaws and lack of coin, right into his heart?

First, he carried her carpetbags and hat boxes up to her first class suite, deposited them and the lady, then returned for her steamer trunk. Though she’d offered to hire help, he waved her off like lugging the thing merited no effort.

In the doing, he found it a wonder that he didn’t bust a gut. Still, the pleasure on her face upon delivery generously rewarded his toil.

Pointing, she waited in the hall as he placed the trunk in her boudoir, obviously adhering to no appearance of evil. She had no reason for concern though, like he’d ever be so stupid to act less than the perfect gentleman with Wallace’s widow.

Contemplating whether the lady’s concern or suffering the General’s wrath kept him in line, he chuckled silently.

Once back into the hall, she extended her hand. “Wonderful! Thank you so much, Marcus. I certainly appreciate the favor.”

“You are more than welcome.” He took it, shook ever so slightly, then backed a step. “Where and what time this evening, ma’am?”

“Shall we meet in the lobby? Say, seven sharp.”

He raised his hand to tip his hat, except it still wasn’t there, so he touched his forehead, rolling his finger away with a slight bow, but never taking his eyes from her face.

Hopefully, the movement distracted her from realizing he painted her features on the canvas in his mind. As much as he wanted to stay, decorum dictated he leave.

“Until then.”



Rebecca turned and put her hand on her door knob, then froze until his footfalls faded. She glanced over her shoulder to the empty hall. What was it about the man?

Inside again, she retrieved his trousers and her purse. She checked the Derringer, made sure she had plenty of coin, then strolled out. She loved shopping, especially for someone else.

Took longer than expected, but she finally found exactly what she wanted at the haberdashery.

Thought for a bit she'd have to go to extreme measures, but as it was, found herself with ample time for a leisurely bath and a visit to the salon for help with her tresses. She loved the way the lady piled and pinned most of her curls, leaving others to cascade and swing.

To top it off, she visited the millinery for a classy headpiece, a small triangle of silk sporting a single plume and large faux emerald that sparkled in the light.

There she also came across a lovely bottle of French perfume simply beyond exquisite. She loved its hint of jasmine that wafted on a sweet spring breeze.

Halfway down the last flight of stairs, she spotted him standing a few feet back from the landing. His stare as she navigated the final steps made her heart pick up its pace, bolstered her confidence that the extravagant feather atop her head truly enhanced the effect she'd been hunting. The look in his eyes...inhibited swallowing.

Stepping off the last stair, she approached. He inhaled deeply then shook his head. "Oh my." He drew in another long breath, closing his eyes. "You smell better than you look. I mean, you look outstanding, but your fragrance is even better. Not that you didn't smell good before... I mean..." He finally just shrugged. "Your appearance shames me. I should have brought my dress blues."

She grinned. "I understand, but here." She handed him her door key. "On my couch, you'll find some new threads...the least Henry Buckmeyer could do."

At first, he didn't take it, then scooped it up like a kid in a candy store and took the stairs two at a time.

"I'll wait on the deck, just outside the dining room."

He waved one hand but didn't look back.

Might do the man a bit of good to have his pride pricked. She chuckled, so enjoying the highly pleasant distraction he afforded.

Dressing took the man longer than expected, but the wait certainly proved worth it. The ready-made suit fit perfect. She loved the shirt's high collar and how it seemed to choke him.

He grinned then extended his arm. "Thank you."

She slipped her hand under then over his offering. "You're welcome." She glanced down. He'd shined his boots. Perchance that accounted for the extra time.

Once at their table, he hurried ahead and held her chair. Of all Wallace's charms, social graces never topped the list. Not that he wouldn't have pulled out a chair or opened a door for her, he just didn't think of doing so.

No one had instilled such gentlemanly manners. Marcus took the

seat across from her then leaned in a bit.

“So tell me true. Why are you going to San Francisco?”

After that night, she’d not see him again until only God knew when—if even then. So why not? She’d wanted a sounding board, but the only one she’d even been tempted to reveal her heart to had been May, but that would have been like speaking straight to Daddy, and he was the last person she wanted knowing her true intentions.

She held her peace until the waiter finished setting waters in place and headed toward the kitchen. Though she took the principal part and ordered for them both, her dinner partner didn’t seem to mind.

Perhaps the Golden Rule came into play.

“Are you a man of honor, Marcus?”

“Yes, of course. I’ve never broken a confidence or betrayed a trust.”

“Then you may be exactly the one with whom I need to discuss my plans.”

One eyebrow raised slightly, and his mouth conveyed a rather bemused expression. “How so, dear lady?”

For two sips of red wine, she studied his eyes, then filled her lungs and exhaled slowly. “It is my intention to adopt a child. An infant for certain. What I’m conflicted about is the notion of a second...an older child.”

He took his first taste of wine. Had she shocked him? Was that the odd expression she saw? Certainly surprise at the least.

Setting his glass down, he leaned his head slightly to the side as though he’d rejected his initial response for one he calculated she wanted to hear. But that wasn’t what she needed. She hoped for his true opinion.

“Commendable on the first, but perhaps ill-advised on the second.”

“Really?” That seemed quite honest and not at all what she would have anticipated. “How so?”

“If I’m remembering it right, doesn’t the Bible say that the sins of the fathers are visited on children up to the fourth generation?”

“Yes, it does. But also that His mercy endures forever. What’s your point?”

“An infant would never know his or her parents.” He paused too long.

“And?”

“Well, a baby who counted you its mother from the start would have a better inclination to emulate you and your values. While an older child...might not. It seems the elder would be more likely to follow in his—or her—parent’s footsteps.”

Not the answer she’d anticipated, but his logic had merit, and

she'd never considered that aspect. "I would have bet hard money you'd not have quoted the scriptures."

"Really? And why not if I may ask?"

The waiter approached carrying a tray with two soup bowls. Good. His delivery of the appetizer would give her time to frame her answer.

After a quick exchange with the server over the main course, then half a dozen spoonfuls of the gumbo that couldn't hold a candle to that served round her daddy's table, Rebecca leaned back.

"To answer your question, sir. I thought a man of letters such as yourself would quote some literary genius to make a point, not the Good Book."

Nodding toward her bowl, he grinned. "You don't like gumbo?"

"No, no. It's delicious. It's just that compared to Miss Jewel's, it rates a poor second at best."

"I thought it excellent, and gumbo is one of my favorites, so I consider myself a bit of a connoisseur. So where is it that I may partake of this Miss Jewel's soup?"

"She's our family cook...at home, and I've never eaten any dish anywhere that can compare to her counterpart."

"One more reason to visit Clarksville."

"Indeed. Before...when I first mentioned adopting...I feel as if you didn't tell me your heart. At least not the whole of it."

"Very perceptive. My first impression was why. You're still young enough to have children. Why not find a suitable mate and have babies of your own?"

"Flattery does not become you. The Lord has not seen fit to bless me. I...you see...I find myself..." Tears popped out quite unexpectedly and filled her eyes. She widened them to keep any from falling. "With this hole in my heart."

A sincere concern appeared in his eyes. He reached across the table and covered her hand. "That's so understandable, fair Rebecca. But I spoke truth just now, not flattery. Regardless of what the calendar claims, you are still young and a very beautiful lady."

She bore into the windows of his soul. "I have a mirror. Forty-two is not young, nor an age when a woman usually prepares to bear her first child. Not to mention that my husband has gone and died of pride and stubbornness." She dabbed her cheek to catch one escapee.

He didn't flinch, but seemed to open his eyes wider. For too long, she teetered on the edge then had to look away.

"It's just a number, Bitty Beck."

She looked back. "My brother and husband have such big mouths."

"No, ma'am. They do not. But if you prefer I not use Levi's pet

name for you, I'll certainly refrain. My point was that you are still young and deserving of that moniker."

Mercy, she would surely miss this man and his company. Had she ever known a more worthy adversary?



Tears threatened to erupt. Ford hated that in himself, but even worse, the sorrow in her eyes. No doubt somewhat due to Wallace's untimely death, but seemed to him the bigger sorrow of her heart had to do with her not being a mother.

Man, would he love partnering with her on that project, but then if the General still held sway over whom she wed, then his lack of coin would surely disqualify him. His love-hate relationship with filthy lucre again raised its ugly mug.

The waiter came with the main course, a nice slab of beef for him and a grilled chunk of white fish smothered in leeks and mushrooms for her. Tickled him how she took the liberty of ordering without even a word of succor.

But then, she was paying, so why not? And he appreciated it even more since he would never have picked the pricy steak.

Between bites, he studied on each part of her face. Halfway through, he set his knife and fork down. The more he looked, the more it became quite apparent the lady's features were anatomically correct.

Or had he been blinded by her inner beauty?

"Something wrong with your steak?"

"No, ma'am." He steadied his gaze on her eyes.

"Then what?"

"Only you. I've been trying to memorize your features."

"Eat. I'm not that pretty."

Without leaving her eyes, he picked up his fork in compliance, his mission to please her in every area.

"I must disagree, though it pains me to be at any odds with you. The only debate is if your physical features are so perfect or if the beauty of your soul has swayed my opinion."

Her lips pursed then erupted into a wide grin. "I repeat myself. You, sir, are an unadulterated flirt and flatterer."

"No, ma'am. I am only an artist who for the last dozen years hasn't seen anyone or anything worthy of putting oil to canvas before today."

"Oh, my dear, Mister Ford. Won't you please enjoy your dinner? You may paint me when you come back through Texas, if you should

ever find yourself here again. But for now, if you please, can we change the topic of conversation? Please?”

Though he hated not extolling her beauty, for her sake, he bridled his tongue and mentally thumbed through the categories for a topic. In no time, he had it. “And so, Rebecca, are you thinking of a boy or a girl?”



“Good question.” Rebecca filled her lungs then exhaled slowly. What did she really want? Did she know her own heart? “The old wives say a son first, then he needs a little brother.”

He grinned. “What do you say?”

Almost on their own, her shoulders hiked an inch. “I’m not sure. I suppose I figured that as soon as I laid eyes on him or her, I’d know my baby. And the same with an older child.”

“Leading with your heart can be dangerous.”

She bought a bit of time with another bite of fish, then more with a sip of wine. “What happened twelve years ago?”

His eyes closed, and the corners of his mouth turned down, taking with them that wonderful smile of his, as though the question pried too deeply into his soul.

“I’m sorry. Forgive me for asking.”

“No.” He looked at her, set his fork down, and leaned back. “My daughter went first. She died in my arms.” He inhaled and held it. His eyes glistened with tears. “Julia died the same day, about an hour later.”

She reached across the table and patted his hand. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have pried.”

“No. I opened the door, and well...” He wiped his cheeks then shook his head. “You’d think after all these years, but well...” He shrugged. “Like the fool I am, I burned all of her paintings. The ones I still had, the first one I did of her, I sold. I’ve tried to track it down, but couldn’t. And well...”

He grinned, lifting her heart. How could he do that?

“Well what?”

“I did come across an even earlier painting. One I’d done before Julia and...” He chuckled. “The idiot wanted five hundred dollars for it—not that I was buying—but compared to the one of Julia it ranked a poor second at best. I finally gave up trying to find it. I had saved up fifty dollars hoping that would be enough.”

“Mercy, who’d you sell the painting to in the first place?”

He shook his head. “It went at auction, and the buyer was a broker. He sold it to some fancy lady who wandered in one day for cash and didn’t remember her name or much about her.”

“How much did it sell for originally?”

“Twenty-five dollars. I thought I was rich. The broker tripled his money. Still...I’d hoped my fifty would get it back if I found it. But then when I found the other one....”

She didn’t detect any pride that one of his paintings had been so valued. The only emotions she sensed were regret and a deep sense of loss. So much pain, he must have really loved his wife and child.

“How old was your daughter?”

“Six months.”

“How awful, bless the Lord that she’s with Him now.”

He raised an eyebrow then returned to his steak with a vengeance. Had she touched a sore spot? Why wouldn’t he want to engage her about infants going to heaven if...? Oh dear. Either his anger toward God still burned hot or he didn’t know the Lord. How had the man survived his family dying without the Comforter.

In the moment, she remembered the loss of her mother. Must have been about the same age as when he suffered his own.

Setting his fork down, he met and held her eyes. “Fantastic meal, can’t remember enjoying myself more, and....”

She waited for him to continue, but he didn’t. “And what?”

“Oh, just you. How beautiful you are. Did Wallace ever tell you about almost marrying Laura?”

“Yes, his heart was too big for his own good. She would have been so wrong for him.”

“That’s what he said.”

Though unsure she wanted the dinner conversation to digress to her dead husband, curiosity refused to be denied. “What else did he say about her?”

“That she was nice enough, not hard to look at, except when compared to you—then the girl was ugly as homespun.”

“I know he did not call her ugly. Did he?”

A little chuckle escaped, sort of a snorting little laugh. “Wallace Ruck compared every other female to you my dear, and all in varying stages of homeliness.”

“He did have a way with words. Mother May kept telling him if he’d just write it all down, she could get him published.”

“Really? He never mentioned that. Why didn’t he?”

She liked it that Ford didn’t know everything about her husband. “Mostly because of his sordid past. He claimed all the really good stories needed to stay buried along with all the men he’d killed.”

The man nodded. “Couldn’t tell you the number of times Wallace would get halfway into a story then stop and jump ahead like he’d just figured out he didn’t want to tell the next part.”

The waiter came, removed their plates, and refilled the water glasses.

Ford nodded. “Shall we call it a night? Give the man back his table.”

Was he being polite, or did he really want to be another place with someone else? “The evening is still young. Would you like to retire to the lounge?”

“Never thought a good Methodist would suggest such a thing. I’ve been under the impression you people shunned bars and the like.”

You people? Definitely not saved, poor man. “Not really. There’s nothing wrong with taking a little wine for the stomach’s sake.”

“The Apostle Paul, right? Isn’t that what he told one of his disciples?”

“You’re absolutely right.” She stood, and he jumped to his feet. “Marcus, if you’d rather, we can certainly call it a night.”

“No, not the case at all, I assure you. Only thing that awaits me is a dark, lonely room. Well, and the memory of your beauty. I’d much rather let my eyes feast while they can. There’ll be time aplenty for reflection after you sail out of my life.”

The smile, she couldn’t hold back, though the flatterer didn’t deserve it one bit. “You’re such a flirt. But you do have a way with words. Extend your arm, sir, and lead me to this den of iniquity.”

Oh dear! Had she really said that?



Was that an invitation?

Ford did as told, but escorted her to the bar instead of where he’d

rather take her—the stairs that led to her room. Probably only a slip of the tongue.

After all, she'd been quoting the Bible since he met her, and in some circles, bars and saloons were dens of iniquity. Her hand on his arm sent his heart to double-time. Then her fingers lingering on his when he helped her into the chair caused his breath to catch. Like the gentleman he aspired to be, took the seat across from her.

Contrary to what his flesh so desired, a quick romp in her room wouldn't do.

Then again, filthy lucre darted its forked tongue. The lady rolled in gold coin. He may be a lot of things, but would never be kept by any woman. No matter how gorgeous.

Idiot echoed through his soul. Pride goes before a fall.

"Pray tell, sir, what topic of conversation have you been having in your head?"

He shook it. "Am I so easy to read?"

"Don't change the subject. What was going on with you just now?"

"I'd rather not say."

She took a sip of wine and eyed him hard. Made him want to loosen his collar. "Why not?"

"Wallace mentioned you could be pigheaded at times. Once, your father added, 'Just like her mother.' "

With a rather sly grin, she shook her pretty head. Blonde curls framed her face. Oh to have a sketch pad and piece of charcoal, oils and canvas even better. "You're trying to change the subject again."

"Was I now?"

"Yes, you most definitely were. Now what were you thinking when we first sat down?"

A kiss would silence her, but then she'd probably slap him. Did he have a choice but to tell her? "Contradictions. The internal war that we all must wage."

"Now you're just being purposely vague. Exactly what were you thinking, sir? And no generalities."

"I don't think I've ever met anyone like you, Rebecca. You are worse than a stray dog digging for a lost bone."

"Oh? So you figure if you insult me, I'll change the subject?" Her attempt at a serious face only lasted a few of his heartbeats, then the mirth in her eyes spread to her lips.

"Being persistent isn't an insult."

"But being compared to a stray mongrel is."

"Perhaps I should have used a more feminine metaphor. Kittens wanting their mother's milk. Would that have been better?"

"Certainly kinder. My guess would be your pride. You were

debating with yourself over me paying for the dinner and now more for drinks. But don't let it hurt your pride. Please, Daddy would insist, and like I've said, it's his money."

"Perhaps, but if you peered a bit deeper, you'd have found the two other major sins involved."

Her eyes sparkled in the lamplight. "More generalities."

The last word. That's what she craved, not an answer. So he leaned back and fixed his eyes on hers, giving it to her. She stared right back like her will would prove stronger than his. He loved that game, except his hands begged to touch her.

His arms longed to engulf her. His lips craved to taste her sweetness.

She looked away, as if suddenly uncomfortable. "If you'd be so kind as to gather your things from my room and return my key."

Her eyes returned to his. He had offended her, but how? For a couple of booms of his heart, he got lost in them. What had he said to cause her to want the evening to end so abruptly?

It finally hit him. His last word wasn't enough. She wanted specifics and...had to win.

"Our financial differences, and all that entailed."

One side of her full lips edged up a fraction. "I thought that was it, and like I said, it boils down to pride. If the tables were turned, and I was between engagements, and you were, say, a filthy rich industrial giant, then neither of us would think a thing about you paying."

"True."

"So tell me now, why should there be a difference? There's no reason for you to think less of who you are."

His lips spread. So, the intriguing lady wanted to win so badly, if need be, she'd deprive him of the last hours or even minutes he had to spend with her. "What time does this old girl steam out on the morrow?"

Her grin bloomed. "Nine, why?"

"Want to buy me breakfast? Or rather, let the General?"

"How about you working for it?"

Such spoiled behavior. He shrugged then nodded a yes, but the duty he preferred didn't pay unless the lady in question was considerably older...and the Widow Rusk, only a few months his senior, would never qualify.

One more black mark against her name. "What did you have in mind?"

"I've been thinking about a sketch. I'd love to judge your talent for myself, and...let's say...have a souvenir if you'd be agreeable."

A fabulous idea. "I'd love that. So long as you'll sit."

"Me?" She appeared truly flustered. "Why me? I was thinking of

the river or a still life.”

“Only you will do. I’ve itched to draw you since climbing into the coach of The Belle. Do you happen to have paper and pencil? A pad and charcoal would be even better.”

“I have the former, but perhaps we might be able to procure the latter...and I suppose I could sit for you. So long as it’s in a public place.”

He drained his wine then stood and extended his hand. “Come on then. Let’s get to it. I might have time to do one for myself for my own remembrance.”



Rebecca fished out a wad of greenbacks, drained her own glass, then took his hand and let him pull her to her feet. Her big mouth! One might think of her as a silly schoolgirl infatuated for the first time.

But...had she ever been this way before? Could that be it? No. The wine had run her thoughts around the stump. That’s all.

In the morning, she’d feed him breakfast then never see him again.

Silly? Yes—undeniably.

Outside the lounge, he stopped.

“Where are we going? Is the paper in your room?”

“It is.”

“Excellent. I can collect my things, then we can find some decent light.”

Like co-conspirators, he kept a gentle grip on her hand, as she hurried with him up the stairs. A bit sweaty, but warm and firm, and holding it seemed so natural. Outside her room, he stopped, fished out her key, unlocked the door, then returned it to its rightful owner.

“I’ll wait out here. Whenever you’re ready, then I can change. Do you have anything I can use to wrap up this most wonderful suit you brought me?”

“I appreciate you being aware of appearances, but don’t be silly.” She put the key in her clutch. “Come inside. I’ve got two rooms, and we don’t need to waste any time. It so happens I picked up a carpetbag for you. Yours seemed a bit long in the tooth.”

The makings of a protest threatened to form, but instead, he shrugged and followed her inside. She loved him being so uncomfortable. A proper gentleman. She retrieved his new bag and handed it to Marcus then closed her bedroom door behind herself.

“You do know if Henry Buckmeyer were to walk in, he’d shoot me

dead and ask questions later.” Even through the walls, she could hear fear in his voice.

“Oh, relax, please. Daddy hasn’t killed anyone in years.”



Without taking his eyes off of her, Marcus leaned back. If only he had oils and canvas—and daylight, but no matter, he loved what he had—her presence.

The ship’s lounge proved the best light to be found, and the most comfortable seating as well...but still.... He studied his work then made a tiny extra line on the drawing.

“So?” Rebecca cut her eyes but didn’t move her position, and only barely moved her lips. “Are you through?”

“Yes.” He grinned.

Melting, she wiggled her shoulders like they’d been begging all along to move, then stuck her hand out. “Let me see.”

The part he hated. Sharing what had been only his. “How about I keep this one and do you that still life you wanted...or something else?”

She wiggled her fingers. “Hand it over, Marcus Ford.”

Was there any way around it? Probably not. He set the piece of paper on the table, turned it toward her and slid it over.

Her breath caught. “How in the world? Is... is that really me?”

“Yes, ma’am. In all your splendor. Well, all the splendor I could muster from this pencil. I can’t –”

Her palm went up, silencing him. She finally tore her gaze off the drawing and looked at him. “You’re remarkable.”

One shoulder hiked a bit. Why did he hate being praised?

“My hand had...no choice.” He smiled. “With the most gorgeous female in captivity as a subject, I couldn’t miss.” Over her shoulder,

the ship's clock claimed it to be a quarter to three.

How was that possible? Where had the night gone?

"Sorry, I didn't realize it'd gotten so late. Shall we call it a night?"

"If you want." She turned toward the clock then back. "Wow, when did it get so late? It passed so quickly."

For the first time in years, what he wanted sat across the table, not rotting in a dark grave. Those eyes, her lips... He loved the way her hair framed her face. "What I'd love is canvas, oils, and better light. That rough sketch doesn't do you justice."

She beamed. Then, though her lips pursed, her eyes still smiled. "Marcus, you are such a flirt. Where'd you study art?"

"My father taught me most of what I know." Perfect. Why had he opened that door?

"Certainly a good teacher. But I ascertain your talent is a gift. One that can't be taught, only enhanced."

Hopefully, she'd change the subject. She leaned a bit to the side and stared at him. He met her gaze for a few moments then had to look away.

"Marcus? What's wrong?"

Should he tell her? Why not? In just a few hours, she'd be gone and he'd probably never see her again. The thought stabbed his chest. "Father wasn't a good teacher."

"Really? How so?"

Holding out his right hand, palm down, he touched it with his left one. "See that spot there?"

She leaned in and looked at the back of his hand. "That scar?"

"Yes, ma'am. That's where he'd whack my hand if I made a mistake."

"Mercy! That's terrible."

"Such a perfectionist he was." He studied the reminder for a minute then looked back up and smiled. "No matter how good I got, as far as he was concerned, it was never good enough."

"I'm sorry."

"After finishing a piece I thought would surely, finally please him, I got this for my effort. All he saw were the imperfections. We argued, and he ended up breaking his stupid stick over my head."

"Oh mercy. That's just awful. How old were you then?"

"Sixteen. Never painted another thing until after his death."

She covered his hand with hers. "What a horrible man."

"You should have seen his work." He glanced toward the door, remembering his father's favorite piece. "Dad had his good traits, but art was..." He shrugged. How could he explain? He missed his father alright, but even if he had the power, still would never bring him back from the dead.

Rebecca tightened her grip on his hand. The warmth spread to his heart. "What was art to him? Finish your thought." She released his hand and leaned back.

Might as well tell her the whole story. He smiled inside despite the misery that thinking of his father along with art always brought. The persistent lady didn't look like she would be put off.

Besides, another story would keep her sitting there across the table from him, and his eyes could continue their feast.

"One of his paintings had caught the eye of a rather well known artist in Paris. He met my mother through the man."

"Was she an artist, too?"

"Somewhat, but not in Father's class. Her talents lay in languages. Spoke seven."

"Very impressive."

"Anyway, they fell in love. After my maternal grandfather died they used her inheritance to immigrate, came straight to New Orleans."

"You're French then?"

"Mother was. He was English, I was born here. Anyway, my father was gaining a reputation, selling some of his work now and again. But he got the shakes. Nothing helped but opium. After a while, even that failed him. He never painted again after the palsy."

"How old were you then...when he quit painting?"

"Twelve."

"So when did you start?"

Though he surely hated the telling, he loved her interest. Could he withhold anything from the lady?

"Early on, I fooled around with charcoal then watercolors for a while. Always on cheap paper though. He didn't want me wasting his pigments or canvas, not until I'd proven myself."

"I can hardly imagine such a man."

"I understand that, knowing Henry Buckmeyer. At the time, I couldn't comprehend Father's attitude. In retrospect, appears jealousy played its part."

"How so?"

"Mother said he had to really work at his art, where mine...." He shrugged. "Sometimes it just flows. Like tonight. But then how could it not, having you as a subject."

Her eyes smiled, but her mouth pouted. "Marcus, you must stop being such a shameless flirt."

He loved that expression. Made him want to kiss her.

She'd accused him before, but he couldn't help himself. "Anyway, after about a year of him not doing anything with his supplies, mother had suggested selling them. Nothing came of that. One sleepless night,

I snuck into the studio through a window and painted 'til the sun came up. After he whipped me for stealing, he put me to work for real."

"Doing what?"

"Painting for his pottery business. Before, I'd only helped with firing the kiln and mixing the slip. But he'd gotten to where he could hardly hold a brush."

"You painted pottery? Like dishes?"

"Hand-painted china, dishes, cups. Individual pieces and whole sets. Sold them all over, even shipped some to Europe. He made stencils for me at first. I followed his patterns, then...." He grinned thinking how mad the old man got that first time.

"What are you smiling about?"

"Oh, I changed things. Painted them better without using his outlines, so it went much faster, too." Ford snorted. Why had his dad been like that? "He never told me, but mother claimed my work brought more money."

"Did he ever acknowledge your talent?"

"Not really. Mother always raved about it, but never in front of him. Anyway, guess I took a little from both of them."

"Where'd the math come from?"

"Who knows? Numbers have always been easy for me, as most things." Why had he said that? How arrogant could he be? Hopefully she wouldn't think him insufferable.

"Is that so?"

His face warmed, then mercifully, a question that he'd thought of earlier jumped to his tongue. "Levi mentioned the mule story at the Titus Trading Post several times. One night I got him to elaborate. You were there, right?"

She laughed then nodded. "One of the best days of my life."

"I'd love to hear your take on it."

"I'd already decided God sent Henry Buckmeyer to be my father—the answer to my prayer—and had been calling him Daddy in secret. Only when we were alone."

"How old were you then?"

"Nine. My mother stayed mad at him most of the time, so I figured better not to be the one to tell her. Anyway, Mister Titus had just told Mama he'd heard the cotton buyers were leaving Jefferson in two days."

"I'm sure she didn't want to hear that."

"Absolutely. We were still like five days out, and she got all catawampus, thinking she'd never make it in time after all she'd gone through."

How interesting that she'd picked the General before her mother.

He'd never heard that, but didn't stop her story. He leaned back and let her words fill his soul.

What a grand gift he'd been given—the chance to meet the Widow Rusk. And here he'd kept her up through the night...there'd be plenty of time to sleep though.

Twice, when she acted like the tale was told, he asked another question and kept her going. The thought of not spending even one available tick of the clock with Rebecca before they threw him off the ship and she sailed out of his life forever...it soured his belly.

After she relayed the story about Henry getting them all to New Orleans, another question presented itself. "A couple of times, Charley Nightingale mentioned a fight at the Titus Trading Post, but I never could get Wallace to say what that was all about."

"You must be talking about the time back in 1844, the trip when he brought Sassy Fogelsong home—you probably know her as Rose Baylor. It wasn't much of a fight though. Understandable that Wallace wouldn't talk of it. He killed a man there who'd once been his friend."

"Really, who?"

"Nick the Knife is what they always called him; I believe Ward was his last name. Anyway, Levi had his pistol pointed at the man's nose, while Nick had his blade at a woman's throat—an innocent shopper at the trading post. Wallace slipped in the back door and killed the man from behind with his knife."

"The guy had been his friend?"

"They'd ranged together right after San Jacinto."

"Was Sergeant Nightingale there?"

"Charley was only four then, or had he just turned five? Anyway, he didn't come in until the deed was done, but he'd been having nightmares about the man. Those stopped."

A whole other story—one he'd love to hear, but the night's blackness had grayed some. "Seems the new day is upon us. May I buy you a cup of coffee?"

"I'd love some, yes. But first, I need to put this in my room." She pointed to the sketch.

"What? I don't get to keep it to remember you by?"

"No, sir. Sorry. It's for me to recollect of this night...and your company."

"In that case...I'm honored you'd want to." He stood and extended his arm. "Shall we then? I can collect my things from your room while you put the drawing away."

Instead of staying on the ship for the brew, she insisted he take her to town.

Coffee, then breakfast followed by a leisurely window shopping stroll through Jefferson, as if he had spare money to spend, and she

had all the time in the world.

And though she hinted several times at how wonderful a hat or shirt would look on him, he ignored her offers. How could he let her sail out of his life in only a few hours?

Then the first bell sounded. He hated the warning that soured more than his mood. The ship's single stack bellowed white smoke, and someone pumped out a lively tune on the ship's steam organ.

He stopped at the gangplank and let her hand slip from his. She turned. "In your new bag there." She nodded toward his grip. "I put a King James Bible I bought you yesterday."

He found a smile though every cell in his being frowned. "Thank you."

"In its pages, I slipped a blank note and envelope addressed with my sister's address in San Francisco. I hope you'll let me know how your interview turns out. I'll be saying a prayer for God's will to be made manifest."

"I will, but with that suit you bought me—I'm a shoe in. How could I not get the position?"

The second bell sounded, sending a dagger into his heart. Footfalls pulled his attention behind him. Several couples hurried toward the gangway. "You best go on. Beat the rush."

She nodded then extended her hand. "Thank you for a wonderful time, Marcus. I'll treasure my drawing."

Was that a tear?

It took everything in him to resist pulling her to him and smothering her with kisses.

Instead, he took her hand, bent at the waist, and brushed his lips over its back. He then retreated out of the way. She covered her mouth with the hand he'd just kissed and backed up the plank ahead of the folks hurrying to board.

He sidestepped up the dock, never taking his eyes from hers.

Once on the ship's first deck, she walked along the rail, staying even with him, looking quite forlorn in a gorgeous sort of way. The distance between the wonderful lady and him couldn't have measured more than ten feet, but it might as well have been a thousand miles—and soon would be.

In just a few days, it'd be exactly that—or more. Was it two thousand miles from Jefferson to the gold fields? Geography had never been one of his fortes.

The last bell sounded, followed by a blast from the foghorn. Someone pulled up the gangplank, and the stevedores shoved the ship off. Its big wheel churned up the Red River's muddy water as the old girl took the widow out of his life.

Rebecca waved then cupped her hands over her mouth and

hollered something, but he couldn't make it out. He shook his head with a hand to his ear. "What?"

Pointing to his carpet bag, she wrote across the air and hollered again. "Write me."

With a smile, he nodded. Would he ever see her again? How could he not? The ship turned a bit. She hurried back along the rail, keeping even with him.

Was he crazy? Why was he letting her go?

The desire to jump in and swim to her almost consumed him, but better judgement overruled his heart. Her beauty and class...she was beyond him. He'd only had the time with her because of sweet fate—riding the stage to the same place. He'd never forget the hours with her though... the bliss before cruel providence tore her apart from him.

Tomorrow or next week, she'd see him for who he really was. A poor man without any prospects. Even if he secured the teaching post, the money wouldn't be enough to even keep her in perfume, much less up to her father's standards. But oh, how his heart pounded against his chest, demanding more of her.

At the back of the ship, she stopped short of the spray from the paddlewheel and waved again. If he didn't know better, he'd say she waved more like a lovesick school girl than a first class widowed matron. Could she have enjoyed the time together as much as he had? No, she only acted like her kind, generous self.

He stood there until the the ship rounded the first turn.

Then she was gone.

Tears filled his eyes and overflowed, wetting his cheeks.

What a fool he was. Crying over a lady he could never have.



Ford stood on the dock staring at the river's muddy water. The lady was gone and wouldn't be coming back. Best he get on with his life. He wiped his cheeks. Such a fool. He had to get himself upriver and interview for that teaching position and live his life without her, no matter what his heart desired.

Except the university lay in the wrong direction. The widow Rusk sailed south.

Why had he let her go? Should he have stopped her? Could he if he had tried?

Sticking his hand into his pocket, he touched the last three coins. Just enough to book passage to Nashville. Then what?

No reason to stand there on the dock all day, wishing and hoping and pining over what could never be. He picked up his bag and made his feet take him back to the boarding house. The room, until noon, was his. What would he do after that?

Was he in love? It seemed so.

But how could he be? He'd just met the woman, though it seemed like he knew her well, having heard so much about her from Wallace and Levi. Rebecca...Bitty Beck. Even the General beamed when he spoke of her, and young Charley held her in such high esteem. Everything about her....

Tears welled again.

The sound of her voice still reverberated in his ears, her laughter, the twinkle in her eyes. The beauty's loveliness loomed just beyond his vision. If he squinted just right he could almost see her. He'd never forget her. Of that, he was sure.

With a heavy sigh, he climbed the stairs to his room then flopped on the bed. He should try to nap until his time in the room lapsed. Sleep would bring some relief from his dilemma. Why did it hurt so much? Julia and Michele dying certainly ripped his heart in two and drove him to the pit.

But that was different. He'd put them in the ground.

Rebecca lived, except she might as well be dead. He could never have her. Never taste the sweetness of her lips, run his fingers through her hair, hold her so tightly they'd become one flesh.

"Stop being so morose, chowderhead!" He chided himself. "Get on with your life."

Had he really said that aloud?

Sounded like something his father would tell him. Be a man, Boy. How many times had he heard that? Humph. He wasn't the one who'd drank himself into an early grave. The old man's shakes, so bad at the end... His mother had to hold the bottle to his lips.

Rolling over, he forced himself to stand. His old carpet bag in the corner caught his eye, looking pretty sad alongside his new one.

Didn't need two.

Might as well get back the four bits he'd given for it. He put the extra change of clothes on top of his new suit, then decided better of it, and pulled his old things out. The new suit, and under it, the Bible she'd bought.

He repacked it all in his new grip with the suit going in last and the book on top of that.

Thirty cents was all he could get for his old bag, but that bought him a bowl of chicken soup and a wedge of cornbread. The food took his mind off her somewhat.

It seemed more like she stood behind him instead of across the table, stayed with him some way. How had she wormed her way so deep into his soul?

Never would he have thought it possible that anyone could unlock that door Julia's death had slammed shut. It had to be love. He'd known the meaning of that word? He loved his wife...and his mother, although he harbored no desire to see her again, or the man she'd taken up with.

Before, he never believed in love at first sight. But experience of the last twenty-four hours shattered that conviction like the teacup his daughter, delirious with fever, had knocked from his hand.

He'd loved his baby girl from the first. But that was totally different. She needed him. But he couldn't save her...or his wife. What kind of man was he?

Not one Rebecca Rusk needed.

"More coffee?" The waitress held out the pot.

"Please." He scooched his cup toward her.

She filled it, turned away, then did a three-sixty. "Sir, I don't mean to intrude, but you look so forlorn. My brother is needing a pole man. I mean...if you're looking for work."

Forcing himself to focus on the lady, he gave a little half-hearted grin. "What's that?"

"He has a flatboat. Men with long poles push it along. He's leaving for New Orleans come morning."

"New Orleans, you say?"

"Yes, sir. Think you might be interested?"

His heart quickened. That's exactly where she was headed. "Well...I uh...." The interview beckoned, but he could teach anywhere. His heart already ached for her, and there'd never be anyone like her again in his life.

What was he thinking? No one in the wide world could compare to Rebecca—ever. He'd been crazy to let her leave. "Yes, ma'am. I just might. What's your brother's name? And where do I find him?"



Rebecca put her book away. She'd read the last line three times and couldn't remember the last paragraph. Stupid. No, silly. That's what she was being. A silly, infantile little schoolgirl, letting Marcus fill her head with such a load of nonsense.

The man probably flirted with every female who caught his fancy. No doubt, he'd already forgotten all about her.

A stroll around the ship. That's what she needed...to fill her lungs with some good clean air and clear her head. Forget about Marcus Ford. Rebecca Ford.

Whoa!

Where did that come from? She was a widow, about to be a mother, and for sure and certain, did not need the distraction of any man in her life. No matter how handsome or intelligent, charming, talented or....

She retrieved the sketch he'd done of her and stared at it. Just more of his flattery, drawing her so much more beautiful than she really was. Did he think she had no mirror?

An idea crept to mind as she studied the paper. Hmm. The least she could do. After all, what was money for if not to help other people? And Marcus definitely fit that bill.

Even smooth talking flatterers could use a hand of charity... someone to do something nice for them. Not that she needed an excuse to write, or even pay the man a visit but....

She smiled, certain he'd be surprised and pleased. What fun to turn the tables on him.

Three more days until New Orleans. She'd start the gears turning once there. It'd be a great way to kill some time, if she kept to her schedule she had a day and a half extra.



Ford stuck the pole into the muddy water, found bottom, then pushed hard, walking toward the back of the flat boat. The ache in his shoulders and legs begged him to quit, but he kept at it.

The other pole men claimed that in another day—two at the most—the ache would lessen then be gone about the time they made New Orleans. He didn't mention that he never intended to go back to Jefferson.

The week it took going upriver against the flow would be easier,

they bragged as if he'd found his new career.

Then the maddening monotonous physical labor ended.

The city of his birth hadn't changed much. More ships lined the expanded docks. Stevedores and blacks—slaves in those days, but now freed men—scurried along carrying their loads or rolling their barrels.

Always with a song, they worked hard same as in the past. He did love the rhythm, the hum of the city.

Still, a black cloud hung over his heart. He'd sworn he'd never set foot there again, but indeed both feet stood planted firmly on the wharf.

Should he visit the graves?

No. To what end? That life was gone. His horrible past with it.

Might Rebecca be his future? He had no guarantee she'd even be there with the full day's head start. He hefted his bag and set out. First thing, he needed to find her steamer.



Rebecca silently counted the greenbacks with the man as he placed them on the desk in front of her next to the stacks of her silver and gold coins.

The banker put the last twenty-dollar bill on the pile then slid a piece of paper toward her. "One thousand exactly. Please sign or make your mark." He grinned. "I'm sorry, Miss Rebecca. Habit I guess."

She complied, put her money away, but didn't let the man off the hook. Her extra time was quickly expiring and she still had shopping to do for Mary Rachel and the Mercantile.

Probably should have taken care of that first, but she'd really wanted... she needed a boon. "I do have a favor to ask."

He eased down into his chair. "How may I be of further service?"

"It involves a friend of mine, Marcus Ford."

The banker leaned back in his oversized, amply stuffed leather throne, and she explained what she desired him to do. He made a few notations on his pad then looked up and nodded.

"If I'm successful, shall I draft your account?"

"Yes, please, sir. If plans hold, I'll be back in ninety days or less."

He stood. "Again, my condolences, ma'am. Horrible, needless war. Wallace Rusk died too young."

She extended her hand. "Yes, he certainly did, and thank you, sir."

The financier took it, but instead of a quick shake, he held on.

"I'm free tonight...if you'd be so kind as to share a meal."

The gleam in the old leech's eyes made him out to be a liar about regretting Wallace's demise. "Thank you, but I sail this evening."

“Shame, perhaps on your return.”

She withdrew her hand. “Perhaps.”

Once back in her room aboard the steamer, she realized her stay in New Orleans had been too short. She hadn’t done half the things she’d intended. Not that she needed more clothes, but it would have been nice to acquire a new gown.

Maybe the ship had a seamstress. Then again, what did she have to dress up for?

At least, she’d done well by her sister’s mercantile with her negotiations. She’d forgotten how much she enjoyed dickering. Quite invigorating.

And the four copies of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* she’d ordered straight from the publisher through the New Orleans’ bookstore had her almost giddy.

The first edition—one for each of her sisters—should arrive in San Francisco before she left on her return. And she’d sent one to her daddy and Mama May as well.

The allegations of Carroll being under the influence of cannabis while penning the imaginative story only added to its anticipation. What would her stepmother think of the novel?

It would be a wonderful addition to their first edition collections.

Hopefully, upon her return home, the banker would have good news for her. A trip to Nashville might even be in order. Wouldn’t that be something? For sure and for certain, she’d have to have a whole new wardrobe.

After all, the professor had seen almost everything she owned, all that was of any account anyway.

“Now you’re just being silly, Rebecca Rusk! That man probably wouldn’t remember one garment you wore. Humph.”

Most likely, he’d already forgotten all about her and moved on with some other younger lady. He could have his pick, no doubt. The charming Mister Ford had surely found some other pretty face to tell how gorgeous she was.

Her nails digging into her palms focused her attention on her balled fists. How ridiculous! Then she laughed out loud. Worse than a silly school girl! Talking to herself and being jealous over some imagined shadow lady.

At least no one else had been present to witness her silliness and chide her over her infatuation.

What claim did she have on Marcus? He was only a man on the stage. It made no difference that she’d spent a wonderful night with him, and... She gazed at the penciled sketch again. He was quite amazing....

“Stop it.”

A bell clanged, followed by the ship's whistle. She hurried out. Where had the time gone? The big wheel bit into the muddy waters. How was it already six o'clock?

She made her way to the wharf's side of the boat. The dock's lamps burned brightly. Three or four dozen folks stood around, some waving, others pointing. It nicked her heart a bit that no one was seeing her off. But then, she didn't know that many people in New Orleans.

Three loud notes sounded. Almost like her daddy's 'come to me' call. Searching the crowd, she couldn't find the whistler. Had it only been her melancholy? Wait! Her eyes darted back to the last group of folks.

Could it be? She searched the faces in the crowd. She would have sworn...but no...it must have only been her aspirant thinking.

Her professor had to be half way to Nashville by then.



Ford whistled again, about blew his lungs out that time, but she just stood there. Had she seen him? Didn't act like it, but what was he expecting? For her to jump in the river and swim to him?

Surely if she had spotted him, she would have at least waved. Many of the travelers still did, but others started drifting off. He stood his ground, hoping, until the steamer disappeared.

Was that his new lot in life? Watching Rebecca sail away?

Why had he ever let her go in the first place?

No doubt, she would have paid his way to San Francisco if only he'd asked. He and his stupid pride. Yet, there he stood like some lovesick school boy, watching his girl waltzing away with some other gent.

Except she wasn't his.

That notion was only a piper's dream. But she could be...right? If only....

Sticking his hand into his pocket, he pulled out the meager contents.

How much was passage to San Francisco anyway? When was the next steamer leaving?

He picked up his bag.

Somehow. Someway. He had to get himself to California.



First thing, Ford found the Pacific Mail Steamship Company's office.

To his dismay, the next one going south departed in three days. He had the eleven dollars to secure passage to Colon, Panama, but not the twenty-five bucks to ride the train across the Isthmus to Panama City—or the fifteen additional greenbacks it'd take to get him to San Francisco.

And that didn't include meals. He walked out of the office into the New Orleans evening. Hated it all to pieces. He'd sworn never to set foot in his home town again, yet there he stood. So what did any other vow he'd made matter either?

In light of Rebecca and the darkness of the wake in her absence, what did anything matter?

He walked straight to the old man's shop. Of course, it was closed. Never expected anything else. Would anyone be around who might remember him? He eased around to the back. A half-grown girl sat beside the kiln whittling on a stick.

The young lady jumped to her feet. "This here is private property, mister."

"I know. You tending the fire?"

She thrust her hand out, knife blade toward him. "The boss lady don't like no strangers hereabouts. Best be moving on along."

"You look familiar. Who was your mama?"

"You no nevermind. I done told you to get gone, so you gots to git!"

The back door opened. A heavyset woman stepped out, remaining in the shadow of the stoop. She cradled a scattergun pointing directly at him. "This here is private property."

“That you, Miss Honey?”

She eased the gun’s barrel to the side and leaned toward him.

“Does I knows you?”

“Marcus Ford. It’s been years, but if you’re Miss Honey, yes. Of course, you know me. My father once owned you and this shop.”

The lady stepped closer, grinned real big, then spun around to the house. “Miss Daisy! Miss Daisy! Come on out here! You gots to come see what them cats done drug in.”



The SS *Orizaba* proved nice enough. Rebecca liked her suite just fine, except for the quietness of it. Loneliness covered her heart in the manner an early morning fog hovered over the creek bottoms. She flopped on the bed as if sixteen again.

Had it been Marcus on the dock? It couldn’t have. Just her romantic side wanting it to be so.

Why, the man was probably already in Nashville by then, getting on with his life without even a thought of her. Like she should be doing! Instead of daydreaming about a man that she’d just met.

Making way too much of a ride with a stranger on the stagecoach and the following time spent wiling away the hours.

He’d nothing better to do. Truth be known, neither had she. The time meant nothing... So why did it consume her thoughts? Why did he?

Wallace Rusk! It was all his fault. Why had he been so stubborn? She could have been perfectly happy at home with him right that minute, but no! She found herself steaming across the middle of the Gulf on her way to California.

Somehow out of place in the home she’d grown up in—her husband suddenly gone—she’d looked forward to the trip.

Visiting with her sisters would be fun, and she’d finally meet her son...or daughter. It’d certainly be grand, but.... Her heart weighed so heavy within, made it hard to breathe...breath after breath, each an effort.

Marcus’s smiling face materialized before her mind’s eye.

Why should she still be thinking about him?

The man wasn’t interested in her, and had made his way north—the opposite direction she sailed. The flirt only needed a diversion, someone to distract himself, pass a little time on his trip. Well, that’s all she’d desired, too. So what?

She rolled over, scooted off the bed, then retrieved the drawing he’d made of her. She studied it for a minute. If only she looked like

that. The way he saw her. But then, he was obviously nothing more than a flatterer.

Maybe she should write Mama May, perhaps even send a wire.

The artist had a gift. Could be exactly what she and her stepmother both needed.

She pulled out pen and paper.

October 13, 1865

Two days out from New Orleans on the SS Orizaba.

Greetings, Mama and Daddy.

No, I'm not in any trouble. Rather, I'm in fine health, and hopefully, this finds you both as well. Daddy, you'll never guess who boarded the stage in Mouth Pleasant. Fine, I know you don't like guessing games, so I'll tell you.

Major Marcus Ford!

He was on his way to Nashville where he planned to interview for a teaching post at the East Tennessee University. Of course, he inquired over you and Levi...and the boys. He'd heard about Wallace and expressed his condolences, but...

She twirled her pen around her fingers. How should she explain about spending the night with his past officer? Her father would surely read in much more than the truth of the time with the handsome major.

After all, the hours had passed quite innocently with only conversation and Marcus sketching her.

She leaned back and thought it through. Deciding to stick with the bare bones and leave out the time element all together, she finished her letter.

There'd be an opportunity to post it, and any others she might write, in Colon before she boarded the train. The old folks would have it in ten days, two weeks at the most.

Once she returned to Texas, if Mama showed any interest, she and her new baby could travel to Nashville and see Marcus. That would be a fun trip. Well, but what if she adopted an infant? That might prove too much.

And how could she possibly travel alone at all with two children? Perhaps Bonnie would consider coming back with her.

But... Was that really what she wanted to do?

Before, she'd laid out her plan so clearly. At least in her mind. Right that minute, doubt nipped her future's vision, blurring everything.

And out of the fog...always the Major...handsome, debonair, and

flattering her with all sorts of lies that she loved hearing.



Ford daubed a tiny fleck of blue on the plate and leaned back. Perfect or as near as possible. To his left, the bench—once loaded with china—sat empty. He stood, stretched, then surveyed the last set.

Shame he couldn't keep it. Rebecca would love it.

For a few beats of his heart, he envisioned the beauty sipping tea from the dainty cup, but made himself put a future with the Widow Rusk out of his thoughts. First, he had to get himself to California.

For all he knew, right that minute, some other galoot was filling her head with sweet words of love. Any man in her presence and of a sane mind, would be a lunatic not to.

On their own, his fists balled. No. He willed himself calm and unfurled his fingers, flashing them several times.

That wasn't probable. The lady, too soon a widow, couldn't be interested in another man yet. Could she? Should she? He'd been a widower much longer and hadn't been a bit interested.

Wallace hadn't been two full years in the grave.

Images of Rebecca flitting from one dandy to another amongst half a dozen or more suitors taunted his mind's eye. Ridiculous.

What was he doing to himself? He focused on the brushes, needed to clean them before seeing Miss Daisy about his money. For sure, he didn't need to stand there making himself fool crazy over the widow.

With the tools of the trade cleaned and stored away, he strolled into the lady's office. Miss Daisy, the boss. She'd always been a hard worker. Had his mother sold the business to her or simply left her in charge?

Made no difference one way or the other. Humming an old hymn, she sat behind her desk and made entries into a large leather ledger.

Closing his eyes, he waited and enjoyed her throaty alto.

She looked up. "Taking a break?"

"No, ma'am. I finished the tenth set. Came to collect my wage."

Not at all like the sweet servant of yore, shot him a rather unpleasant expression as she hurried past him, heading toward the workshop. He trailed her. Of course. She wanted to check his work.

Any competent manager would. Couldn't fault the woman for that...even though she should've known his capability.

She inspected his art then faced him with the white-toothed grin he remembered. "Excellent job! I should've known."

"That's what I thought." He smiled as big, teasing her.

"But there's a fly in the ointment now."

“How so?”

She filled her lungs and skewed her head to the side a half tilt. The lady looked rather pathetic. “Well, sir. I thought I had more time. I’ve got money coming. It’s on its way, but...”

Both hands came up, palms facing her. “Hold it right there, Miss Daisy, ma’am. I mean no disrespect, but my ship sails this evening, and I intend to be on it. How much do you have?”

“Twenty-three dollars is all I have for you right now, Mister Marcus, and that’s only if I empty my mattress. I’ll have the rest in a day or so. Can’t you delay leaving? Keep on painting and then you’ll have twice as much to leave with. Don’t that make good sense?”

“It might if I weren’t in such a hurry. But no. I’m leaving this evening. Give me what you can.”

She shrugged then hurried back toward the shop. As she passed him, an idea struck. “Wait a minute.”

Stopping, she turned around. “What?”

“You’ve got pigment. And oil. Do you have any canvasses?”

“A few. What of it? What you thinking?”

“Besides the cash, figure it out and pay me the rest in supplies.”

The lady smiled. “Done.”

In the end, Miss Daisy still owed him a little and threw in a well-wrapped tea set. Hopefully for Rebecca, but if necessary....

Maybe he could find a patron onboard who would commission him for a portrait or perhaps sell a scenic rendering for a traveler to remember the voyage by. And if not, well then... He’d cross that bridge—or rather gulf and ocean—when he got there.

Then as though luck changed for the better—though Rebecca claimed no such thing existed—outside the office of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, someone had posted a sign that shone like a beacon on a dark night.

‘Wooders Wanted.’

“Four on, eight off, and I get a bunk and three squares from here to Colon, Panama?”

“Yes, sir.” The man slid a printed piece of paper toward him. “Sign or make your mark right here.” He tapped his pudgy index finger near the bottom.

“No pay?”

“Passage and meals.” The clerk shrugged. “What more do you want?”

Ford matched the man’s shrug with one of his own then signed his name.

How hard could shoveling coal be?



Seeing to the ton of goods Rebecca booked to San Francisco for the Mercantile almost cost her a first class berth. A small bribe slipped to the Panama Railroad agent helped him to find one last suite that had suddenly become available.

Inwardly, she thanked her daddy for reminding her to use the gold to open doors.

How often had he told her his own personal ‘Golden Rule’? He who has the gold, makes the rules.

She loved having money.

Shame Marcus wasn’t there with her. She’d enjoy the trip so much more. But what would her daddy and brothers and sisters think of her? Taking up with a man she hardly knew. And with Wallace barely gone?

Except... she could have hired him to be her bodyguard! Oh, why hadn’t she thought of it? Or... She put that notion away. Or nothing, silly woman. She didn’t want him to be a hired man.

Hmm. What did she want him to be? If anything at all? Mercy. As dear as Wallace had been, he was hard enough to live with at times. What if Marcus turned out to be little more than a big flirt?

It would break her heart for him to turn his charms on another woman.

Her jaws clinched. What in the world was she doing? Why was she even still thinking about the man? She had her plans, and he didn’t fit into them. But could he?

Why he remained with her puzzled her. She thought back to all her suiters. Wallace and his never-ending pursuit. None of them ever made her insides quiver like Marcus Ford.

She could not seem to shake his memory loose. It clung like a goathed sticker in the hem of her dress.

With a smile, she pondered her metaphor. So what? Goatheads weren’t so bad. Better than sandburs. She needed to... What? Turn right around and go straight to Nashville? How ridiculous would that be?

No. She couldn’t chase after him. Wouldn’t make a crazy fool of herself.

Maybe on the way home, she could make a detour. If she still had to deal with those troublesome stickers.

The train’s whistle sounded. A little jerk preceded the station moving slowly by. Well, of course, the other way around. Ha! Too late to turn back then.

Too bad, Mister Ford. She'd be in Panama City in a few hours and from there, on to San Francisco.

Marcus Ford would have to wait.

And she would just have to make herself think on her sisters and the orphans and the wonderful sights passing her by.



Panama City surprised Rebecca. Its temperature proved quite comfortable, though warmer than Colon. Not as humid. And so rich in history! She never dreamed that the original Central American city had been founded over three hundred years earlier.

It reminded her somewhat of New Orleans, perhaps due to the Spanish influence of both.

Shame she didn't have time to explore the place, or someone to watch over her while she did.

Had she known how beautiful and different the land was and of all the interesting places to visit offered there, she would have planned a longer layover. She'd love to wander around the area a few days.

Maybe she still could. After all, she'd probably never have the opportunity again. Not if she was to become a mother in the next month.

With no instigation on her part, Marcus Ford suddenly popped into her thoughts. Would he ever steer clear of them? Or just constantly jump into her musings at will?

The pesky gentleman would do nicely to keep an eye out over her, and would surely enjoy searching new lands and its sites with her. If only he hadn't chosen to leave her.

Well, the truth of it was that she left, but he could've chosen to come along. She smiled at her shameless self. The major saw to his

own plans. Why should he chase after her?

Except that man on the dock in New Orleans looked so much like....

No! Only foolishness on her part to even think so. It was just a man who favored him.

The hired coach pulled up to her hotel, then the driver helped her out. The sky over the bustling city looked the same as it did over Texas.

Fluffy white clouds floated by, pulling large patches of shade over the white beach. The sand looked more like tons of sugar. Across the street on the city side, standing in the shadows, a man seemed to be staring.

A quick look over her shoulder for someone else he might be watching proved futile. A chill raced from her heart to her fingertips. So far from home and anyone who even knew her there. She never considered that would bother her so much. Her hand went into her handbag.

The Derringer's cold steel brought a bit of comfort—enough that her heart slowed its pounding.

The driver set her last bag beside her then held his hand out.

“Oh, yes.” Releasing the pistol, she fished out several coins.

Another glance across the street set her more at ease. The shadow man had vanished. Probably only her imagination. Daddy's fretting over her traveling alone, that's what made her over-cautious.

There was not one reason in the world to be concerned.

Two bellmen lifted her luggage and another extended his arm, palm up as to welcome her into the grand lobby. The two half-grown boys heaved her bags inside. The area's openness surprised her.

The huge doors were flung back and left wide open...on both sides of the huge room. Full-grown palm trees brought the outdoors right inside. And bright, colorful birds flew around freely. It took her breath.

The vista of the ocean, with its snow-white borders, stretched across the entire width of the back wall of glass, its doors also left wide open. The salty breeze proved quite refreshing.

One last look across the street showed nothing. Oh well, if someone followed her, she'd deal with him whenever, but until, she refused to ruin her time in that beautiful place worrying over a boogie man.

Mama always said that worry negated every promise of God. And she was always in His hands. She wasn't alone.

He was right there with her in Panama City just as He was in Clarksville. He would never leave her or forsake her. So why worry?

A long, hot bath and a quiet evening would be perfect to relax her

completely.

Maybe she'd even go for a walk on the beach later.



During the five days it took to cross the Gulf of Mexico, for four hours out of every twelve, Ford tossed coal into the boiler's belly, returned to the storage bin, waited his turn, filled his shovel again, and willed his feet to carry him back to the waiting fire.

Seconds after entering the room, sweat ran down his face, soaked his shirt, and stained his trousers.

Besides that, the room's heat proved almost unbearable. The stench permeated every thread, and after every shift, his face and nostrils were blackened with soot.

Still, a deal was a deal, and he'd never welched on one in the whole of his life. The aching muscles across his back chided him for agreeing to the torture at all.

Always another shovelful to toss, then another. He kept at it until finally, mercifully, his shift—the longest four hours he ever endured—ended.

At least he hadn't gotten seasick or passed out like some of the other poor souls who'd signed on. Rumor told of one malingerer who got himself thrown overboard. Probably just that...a rumor.

Perhaps even planted by the boiler master, but who knew? On the high seas, the captain was king. He could order whatever he pleased.

The day that man shouted the 'drop anchor' command...with Central America in sight...was a great day indeed. Ford had endured. But if he had to shovel coal to get back to Texas, he'd be perfectly happy to stay in California.

After the paying passengers, he and the rest of the crew sailed ashore. Colon, Panama. He'd never been in another country, never planned to be either. Yet there he stood.

The minute his feet stood on dry boards, he started asking questions to find out how many days prior the *Orizaba* had arrived. Though glad he'd caught up a day, he still trailed Rebecca by three.

Next, at the railroad station's ticket office, he plunked down his hard earned dollars. Going the forty-seven miles from there to Panama City cost over twice as much as getting all the way from New Orleans to the port city.

But then building a roadbed in the tropics couldn't be cheap or easy.

According to the clerk, the train wouldn't pull out for another hour or better. Ford's last meal on the steamer long since disappeared.

Of course, the plate of frijoles and flour tortillas cost twice a bowl of Cajun beans and rice in New Orleans...forget the cornbread he loved.

However, fasting all the way to San Francisco didn't seem practical.

If that's what he needed to do, so be it.

Seeing his love again would make paying any price cheap.

The train pulled out right on time. Why not? At the princely prices they charged, heaven forbid they should miss a trip.

Panama City surprised him. Elegant old buildings guarded by palm trees swaying in a salty breeze. It begged to be painted. Not a bad idea.

He strolled from the train station to the docks and located the Pacific Mail Steamship Company's office. It fronted a long, albeit drab, row of good-sized warehouses.

The place bustled with activity, but no signs in the window offered employment.

He walked into the small office. The clerk sitting a rolltop desk raised his head, blinked several times like he'd been napping, then smiled a toothy grin. "Afternoon."

"When's the next ship to San Francisco?"

"The *Saint Louis* sailed two days ago. She'll not be back for better than a month. Now the *Sacramento* is overdue, and the *Golden Age* may still be a week out. Who knows for sure?" The man shrugged. "Check back in a few days."

"You keep a passenger list for the Saint Louis?"

The man perked up like he smelled an opportunity to get his palm greased. "Who you looking for?"

"Rebecca Rusk."

"Don't ring no bells."

"My age. Beautiful. Blond curly hair that cascades over her shoulders. And she'd be traveling first class."

The guy's eyes widened. "Hmm. Can't say for sure. Is the lady your sister or something? Our passengers expect a certain amount of privacy. I mean, if anyone held ill will for --"

"Oh, no, no, no. I fought in the Civil War with the widow's husband and accompanied her to Jefferson. I only want to be certain she's safely aboard."

He cleared his throat and ducked his head a little. "How bad you need to know?"

"Nevermind." The man's reaction told him she'd sailed on the Saint Louis. He picked up his bag and strolled out.

What then? Besides the sixteen bucks he needed for the steamship passage, he had to live for however long before the next steamer docked.



After three days in the Pacific on board the *Saint Louis*, Rebecca knew it in her bones. Someone watched her, followed her. Though she'd caught a glance here and again, she could never get a good bead on the gent.

Downright spooky how the shadow man seemed to always be there, then suddenly gone.

Her menfolk set great store in their gut knowings. And her tummy told her that she best catch and confront the charlatan—in a public place—before something bad happened.

But how?

She should have hired Marcus. Forget appearances!

No one would have faulted her for staying safe. Nevermind the man was fun to be around, and so good looking, and... Oh, there she went again. She simply must stop thinking about him. He wasn't there and couldn't help her.

That galoot trailing her sure was though, and taking care of the situation fell to her. And that was that.

Should she alarm the captain? No. He'd probably think her too skittish, a silly woman imagining all sorts of shenanigans. She had the Derringer. And the shadow man wouldn't be expecting a challenge.

That would give her an advantage.

The fourth evening, her blue woolen shawl kept her warm against the evening breeze, and her flowered headscarf kept her hair in place on a leisurely stroll around the main deck.

Then before her pre-supper glass of wine in the lounge, she slipped the purser a silver dollar and whispered in his ear. He nodded then hurried toward the dining hall.

When the bell called the passengers to supper, she hung back until the matron she supped with the first night took her seat across from Rebecca's assigned chair. Perfect.

Before the steward served the after-meal coffee and promised cherry tarts, she leaned in a bit. "Mis'ess Kessinger, I'm in a bit of a bad spot, and hope you might possibly help me."

"Well, if I can, dear. I certainly would be inclined. What is it? And how may I be of assistance?"

For the next few minutes, Rebecca explained about the shadow man and her plan, leaving that open for critique and suggestions.

The old girl grinned. "What intrigue! Perhaps he's a suitor who simply cannot muster the courage to approach. Your beauty must be powerfully intimidating. I like your plan though. It seems a good way

to find out his intentions for certain.”

If only time was not of the essence, she'd tell the old dear all about Marcus not being the least bit daunted by her appearance, but the lady probably wouldn't be interested. Soon as she and her newly inducted accomplice finished the coffee and tarts, pressing issues warranted action.

“How sweet of you to say. That would certainly be innocent enough, and here I'm thinking all sorts of horrid scenarios.”

“Are you afraid? That's dreadful. Perhaps you should speak to the steward. Ask him to keep an eye on you.”

“Oh, no, ma'am.” She took a quick accounting of her motivations. “Not afraid. I'd say more curious...and perhaps even a little angry. But I do have a Derringer, and Daddy taught me how to use it as a child.”

With widened eyes, Mis'ess Kessinger scrunched her shoulders and pursed her lips. “Oh my! Have you ever had to? Fire the pistol, I mean.”

“No, I was about to once...years ago...when Charley plugged the last Comanche.”

“Indians? Oh my! Were you terrified? What were the circumstances, dear?”

“I was.” Rebecca didn't see any way around telling her about Bold Eagle sending the raiding party to steal Rose and Charley.

And then, of course, she had to relay what she knew about Levi and Wallace tracking the old war chief across the Rio Grande into Mexico and bringing him back to justice.

“My, oh my! Someone needs to write all this down! What a story it would make!”

Of course, she told her all about the May Meriwether series of novels based on the family's tales. Should have brought a set to share, but she surely whetted the woman's appetite.

“Yes, ma'am, you'll have to get them all! Now, are you ready for our little ruse?”

“Oh, absolutely! If you're certain you think it's safe.”

“I'll be nearby the whole time. If the man has some nefarious plot, he will be caught before it's hatched. Don't you agree?”

The woman smiled. “Yes, I suppose that's true.” She stood. “This is going to be so much fun.”

Rebecca hoped so, but like she'd said, she had the Derringer—both of them.

Once Mis'ess Kessinger, wearing Rebecca's scarf and shawl, strolled out through the lobby, Rebecca counted to fifteen then slipped out the side door that led straight to the deck's walkway.

The nook she'd spotted on her stroll before supper offered the perfect place to stay out of sight.

The old lady came by, nodded slightly, but made no other gesture of recognition.

Perfect.

Shortly, soft footfalls approached. Her heart boomed like the bass drum in a parade. She tightened her clutch around the pistol, but kept her trigger finger on the Derringer's grip.

Wouldn't want to shoot a suitor.

The man passed, and she jumped out and put cold steel against his back. "Who are you? And why are you following me?"

The man's hands shot into the air. "Jasper, that you Miss Rebecca! Jasper Briggs! Don't shoot me!"

"What?" She spun him around. "Clay's little brother?"

He nodded but didn't lower his hands. "Yes, ma'am. It's me alright. I'd sure be obliged if you stopped pointing that thing at me."

The young fellow stood almost a head taller than she. The Jasper she remembered should be more like shoulder-high, except she'd seen him at church since he came home from the war, but then all the Briggs favored.

She lowered the barrel. "Take off that hat, and let me look at you. What in the world are you doing here, Jasper? And why sneak around, following me? You best have a good excuse for causing me alarm."

Mis'ess Kessinger hurried toward her. "Oh my, dear! Just look at you! You got him! Excellent, simply superb! Are you going to shoot him now?"



Ford watched as the stevedores and longshoremen loaded the SS *Sacramento*. The steamer sailed in three hours, according to the clerk. But eighteen dollars stood between him and boarding as a ticketed passenger. He'd asked, but with the ship's crew for the trip full, they

didn't need extra wooders or deckhands...only paying customers.

He hated money—or rather the lack thereof—could keep him from catching up with Rebecca. Filthy lucre! Whoever coined that phrase had it right. He and his foolish pride. Should have sold the painting! The lady offered thirty dollars, but how could he?

To that very day, he still regretted selling that first one of Julia. No, he needed to find a book store. The Bible Rebecca had bought should fetch a few dollars, and the new suit perhaps another five or six. What else could he sell? Not the tea set. Would the upstretched canvases and pigment bring the difference?

He picked up his bag and the painting and headed back into town.

In the middle of the plaza across from the first store that advertised books, he sat on the fountain's half-wall and pulled out the Bible. He stared at the book for a bit. She'd thought enough of him to buy it...after what? Just a few hours together? But what difference would that make if he couldn't get himself to California?

He held the painting out. Definitely captured her likeness and....

The Bible slipped from his hand. He stuck his foot out to blunt the fall, and the book landed on its spine, flopped open. There in its gutter, a piece of paper folded around a twenty-dollar bill almost took his breath away. How had she known?

He unfolded a handwritten letter.

Marcus,

Count it a loan from Daddy. You can pay him back when you visit Clarksville. I pray your interview goes well. Be sure to write and let me know.

*Your new friend,
Rebecca Rusk*

With time aplenty, he stuck the letter back in his Bible, forgot all about selling her gift, jumped up, and hurried back to the dock. There, he procured a ticket for a voyage on the SS *Sacramento*. What a boon!

Nevermind he only had enough money left over for one meal every other day. He'd fast the whole way if need be.



After a late night with the young man, Rebecca didn't see any way around the stump. No way to get out of telling her accomplice the whole story. Should never have included the older woman in her plans, but then, how could she have known it was Jasper? Ah well, the best laid schemes...sure proud she hadn't involved the captain or

his steward.

Certainly something to be thankful for.

Over an after-breakfast coffee, she began the sad story with Wallace coming home from the war. She told of his stubbornness then filled the lady in on a little Buckmeyer family history.

Of course, she wanted to know the whys of Rebecca's grown sisters living in San Francisco, so she shared all the way as to her reason for visiting and her intentions to adopt a baby.

Prior to the revelation of taking in an orphan, the old dear held her peace, but at the mention of the possibility of bringing two children home, her eyes widened. She coughed then set her cup down too hard. "Are you sure, Rebecca? One child is hard enough, but two...."

"I know. But mother died a few days after my brother Houston was born. I was twenty-one. My sisters were four, eight, ten and eleven, so...technically, I've had five—certainly more than my share—to raise, but I want one of my own. I really do."

"But you're not that old, dear. Have you considered remarrying?"

Of course she had, but telling Mis'ess Kessinger about Marcus seemed neither proper nor called for. Why, no telling if she'd ever even see the man again.

"Wallace always blamed himself, but I was a bit long of tooth myself when we married. I don't want to wait any longer. I want a baby to love. She—or he—will give my life purpose."

The lady shook her head. "Oh, you're still grieving. What are you, sweetie? Thirty-five?"

Stifling a giggle, she grinned. "No, but thank you. I'm forty-two."

"Sakes alive! You certainly do not look it. Not at all." She took a sip of coffee then smiled back. "So what's the young man's story? Jasper, isn't it? Is that right?"

"Yes, ma'am. Jasper Briggs. His big brother married my second sister, Gwendolyn. They run the Mercy House Orphanage in San Francisco where I plan to choose my baby. Anyway, Jasper's been sweet on my fourth sister, Bonnie Claire, forever."

"But she went to California to help with all the babies. I see. So it's truly a family affair, saving poor little unfortunate children. How admirable of you all. Your father must be so proud. So the Briggs are neighbors then?"

"Well, close to fifteen miles north and a little more east, but we all go to the same church in Clarksville. Anyway, Jasper signed up for my father's regiment when Texas joined the Confederacy." Rebecca looked off.

Stupid war. No matter how much she hated it, couldn't change one day of the past. She looked back.

“His family farms and cuts timber. They just got their cotton in, and Jasper hit my daddy up for a loan to put with his part of the profits so he could fetch Bonnie back to Texas. If she’ll have him.”

The lady smiled. “Think she’ll say yes?”

“I don’t know. She hasn’t mentioned any suitors there, but she’s the prettiest sister of us all. I’d be surprised if there hasn’t been plenty of callers. Daddy wants her home, too, though. So maybe.”

“From what I could see, the young man is handsome enough. Think he’d be a good provider?”

She nodded. “Has to be. Old man Briggs loved ’em good and worked ’em hard. Never heard of any of the Briggs men shirking.”

“Did he say why all the lurking around, scaring you? I mean, why not walk up and say hello?”

“Oh, yes. My daddy made the loan on the condition of keeping an eye on me. Stupid men. I should have known. It isn’t like I can’t take care of myself.”

All the way to dinner, that statement shadowed Rebecca. The whole time she and her new matron friend hashed and rehashed the previous night and what awaited her in San Francisco.

More than a baby, she truly wanted someone to take care of her. But not her daddy.

If only she could shake the memory of Marcus Ford.

Though she barely knew the man, hardly an hour passed without her thinking about him.

Had it really been Wallace’s fault that she never got pregnant?

Marcus had fathered one child already.

And Mother May had been older than Rebecca when she delivered Charlotte. Her new lady friend excused herself for a trip to the powder room, and Rebecca toyed with the idea of her and Marcus being parents together.

Having his baby.

The long-held desire to carry a child never lessened, though she denied it voice.

The dinner bell sounded, and she put away such nonsense. She’d already decided her life’s plans. Everything all set out. The dashing Major Ford played no part. Besides, the man hadn’t settled his eternal salvation.

If she knew anything, she knew she could never be joined to a man who didn’t love the Lord with his whole heart. By a living example, Mama’s unbroken vow to God had taught her that much.

The shock on Jasper’s face repaid in full the extra coin it cost her upgrading his meal ticket. The added bonus gave her an opportunity to quiz the young man...when she could pry him away from Mis’ess Kessinger.

It certainly proved an entertaining few days on the high sea.

By the time the *Saint Louis* dropped its anchor in the San Francisco Bay, Rebecca hadn't completely settled on how she would advise Bonnie if she should ask. The young Mister Briggs seemed sure and certain of his heart, but what of her sister?

At least the boy was a believer.

After the last onboard meal, but before the barge arrived, she located Jasper standing on the dockside rail, staring at the city.

"If I could impose, I have better than two tons of merchandise that needs seeing to."

The young man turned and smiled. "Of course, Miss Rebecca. For Mary Rachel's store?"

"That's right. The captain promised it would be loaded on the first barge."



Jasper didn't ask how that had been accomplished, but sure seemed that even though the Widow Rusk claimed no blood relation to General Buckmeyer, the lady got chipped right off the same block.

Both had a way of getting folks to do their bidding. "Once I get your goods on shore, then what? Should I hire a wagon? You got directions?"

"Yes, I do know where we're going, but I'll find someone to take us and the goods. Mis'ess Kessinger offered to give me a personal tour of China Town. I should be back before you're offloaded."

Jasper's pulse quickened. From all reports, two unescorted ladies shouldn't be wandering the seedier parts of San Francisco. And that section definitely had a less than desirable reputation.

"Is that wise, Miss Rebecca? Isn't that where Caleb Wheeler got murdered? And I've heard –"

The woman he hoped was soon to be his sister-in-law held up her hands, stopping him cold. "It is, but Daddy taught me how to shoot a long time ago, and..." She grinned. "Well, I had the drop on you if you'll remember."

How could he forget? "Yes, ma'am. But if you'll wait, I'd be pleased to make a third."

"No need, but thank you for the concern. My tour guide says she knows where to go and where not to. I, too, have heard similar stories, but wanted to see the place for myself." She grinned. "I also don't want to wait around a minute longer once you get my goods offloaded."

"Yes, ma'am. I see your point."

She squeezed his forearm as though trying to reassure him. "We'll be fine." Then the lady glanced over his shoulder. "Good then. Now if you'll excuse me, dear, it seems the skiff is about to come alongside."

Just as promised, she waited with a wagon as the barge neared the dock. Watching the longshoremen hoist her crates and barrels off with the oversized block and tackle and double-beamed boom fascinated him.

The wharf's pulse beat half again as fast as in New Orleans. Everyone hurried to get things done. In Louisiana, folks moved at a slower pace.

Still did their work steady, but more nice and easy like. He'd never seen so many short people in one place. Perhaps the little yellow men's scurrying set the tone in the boom town.

Who knew?

But Jasper liked it, liked both harbor cities, though neither compared with Texas. With or without Bonnie, he'd be getting himself home. The thought of her not coming stabbed his heart like an Arkansas toothpick. But...no reason to linger if she said no.

Down Broadway then into the city, the activity surprised him. So many folks hurrying about, yet not a howdy to be had. Like everyone ignored everyone else.

He touched Miss Rebecca's arm, and the lady turned and faced him. "Think Bonnie will be at the store?"

"Not sure. Last I heard, she'd made herself a regular, helping at the orphanage."

"That's what I heard, too, but a fella can hope. Have any idea how far away the farm is?"



"It's close, but I'm not sure exactly." Seemed to Rebecca that 'pathetic' described the boy best, wanting to see who he claimed was the love of his life, no doubt fearful of what he'd find.

He said he'd been smitten forever, except it had been, what? Four years since he'd even seen her. Bonnie would soon turn twenty-five, from twenty when he'd gone off to war.

Rebecca wondered about true love.

Could it be? Did Jasper love her truly? Her little sister might just be the most comfortable young lady in his life. And who knew the condition of Bonnie's heart? Four years was a long time.

Had she fallen for someone else there in California? Definitely a possibility, and probably the instigator of the young man's concern.

The wagon turned, and Rebecca slipped back around and faced

the driver. "Isn't this the street the Lone Star Mercantile is on?"

"Yes, ma'am." The man pointed to his right. "And right there is the Miner's Bank. Less than a block up a little and across the street is your sister's store."

She relaxed. She'd done it. Come all the way from Texas by herself. A smile stretched her lips. Even though her daddy didn't think she could or should, she'd made it.

The teamster whoa-ed his mules right up in front of the Mercantile's steps. Jasper jumped down and extended his hand, but before she could take it, the store's front door flung open and Mary Rachel burst out.

"Rebecca Ruth! You're here! I just got your letter last week, and here you are! Oh, mercy, Sister! You are a sight for sore eyes."

Hugs and kisses and introductions to young ladies, including her namesake warmed her heart. They'd both grown considerably since the last time she'd seen them. A handsome young man hid behind his mama, but kept stealing peeks.

Finally the soon to be eleven-year-old stepped out. "Not fair, Aunt Bitty Beck."

She smiled at the nickname she figured she'd never outgrow. "How's that, Boaz?"

"You being prettier than my mama."

What a little flirt. She shook her head. Was that her lot in life to be a candle to all the male moths?

She focused on the boy's mother. "Look who I ran into on the *Saint Louis*, all grown up! Is Bonnie here?"

"No. She's at the orphanage." Mary Rachel made a sad face aimed at Jasper. "With Clay and Gwen. He'll be so glad to see you!" She turned back to her sister. "If I'd known you'd be here so soon, I'd have arranged a big welcome party."

"We've got plenty of time for that."

"CeCe and Elijah are at the mine with Moses and Lanelle. Want to rest up and go in the morning? Or...."

Rebecca chuckled, glanced at Jasper, then back. "Mister Briggs here is about to bust a gut to see Bonnie. If it isn't too far, I figured we'd go this afternoon."

"Not a problem." Mary Rachel faced her clutch of children. "Becca, you and Boaz hitch the wagon. Susie, you and Francy gather some supplies and some extra picnic stuff, too. If we're going, might as well take some things with us."

"Speaking of supplies, the driver's carrying my purchases around back."

"Oh fun! I can't wait to see what all you found." She pivoted. "Francy, would you be certain that brother of yours knows there's a

shipment coming in and ask him to go ahead and log it all.”

“Amos went up to the bank, but I will as soon as he gets back. Hank can get started unloading.”



Jasper offered to help with the team, but the boy especially took offense, so he let it lay. He hated twiddling his thumbs waiting for all the folks who were somewhat his kin through his brother Clay to be ready to go.

Hopefully, he'd be married into the clan soon enough, or either he might never see any of them again.

That notion put his pulse to racing. A life without Bonnie Claire wouldn't be worth much.

Once the the wagon rolled out of the city, seemed he could breathe better. But the way his gut knotted, proved a wonder he got any air at all.

Then the huge mansion came into view. He didn't know what he expected, but it looked like a painted picture with its white fences on either side of the drive and the green pastures dotted with cows and calves. The big house was enormous. Must have been twenty windows across the second floor.

Though hard, he hung back next to the wagon while the sisters hugged and squealed and carried on. His love hardly looked his way, like she didn't want him there. Had she even noticed him? Did she have a beau? Was she already married?

Why hadn't he written her?

Had the whole trip been a fool's errand?

At last, she tore herself away from the sisters' clutch and strolled toward him. He met her halfway and knelt onto one knee just like he'd been planning for four years. "I've always loved you, Bonnie Claire Buckmeyer. Will you marry me?"



His love backed up a step and shook her head. “Get up this minute, Jasper Briggs! You’re making a spectacle!”

He scooted toward her, taking a weird knee step, and extended the small ring box. “I could care less, Bonnie Claire Buckmeyer. For pity’s sake. I’m asking you to be my wife. Don’t I deserve an answer?”

“No, you do not. Not yet anyway.” She pursed her lips and shook her head again. The expression pained his heart. “You know I could never say yes without Daddy’s blessing, so get up now.”

Ah ha. He had her now. Inching closer with more awkward knee-foot steps, he patted his shirt pocket. “But I’ve got it right here. In writing.”

Backing another step, she stared hard into his eyes. Did she not believe him? “You’ve already talked to Daddy then? And he said yes?”

Jasper nodded. “Sure did. I had the coin to get here. He loaned me enough to get us back, said we could get married here, and he’d throw us a celebration party when we get home.”

“Doesn’t sound like Daddy.”

“I’m here ain’t I?” He walked on both knees until he could take her hand. “Marry me, Bonnie. You know I’ve loved you forever. Say yes. Make me the happiest man in the world.”

She exhaled then sank to her own knees and glared, her eyes about to overflow with tears.

“If you loved me, why haven’t you told me before now? Why have you waited so long? Did it never occur to you I might move on, fall in love with someone else? You didn’t think it important to let me know your heart?”

“Bonnie! You haven’t, have you? Wouldn’t’ve been right to get hitched then me go off to war. Everyone knew what was coming. And...and....” He shrugged. “We were both so young and –”

“And what?”

“Your Daddy. Uh...well...him and Levi and Wallace. They would’ve shot me dead if.... I mean if I’d told you, then we might’ve... and well, you was....”

Leaning too close, she smelled so sweet. He thought he might pass out right there. Her lips dripped with such anticipated honey. His heart boomed in his ears. Could she hear?

“I was what, Jasper?” Her whisper intoxicated him.

He filled his lungs. “You were...so...desirable, Bonnie. I had so much trouble controlling myself around you.”

“Do you really love me?”

“Yes, with my whole heart.”

Again, she stared hard and deep into the windows of his soul, and he allowed it. Finally, she nodded. “Fine then. I will marry you.”

“Yes? Did you just say yes?”

She grinned then nodded some more. “Now let me see Daddy’s letter.”

He stood, pulled her to her feet, then swung her around. “We’re getting married!”



Rebecca loved it. How romantic. Jasper dropping to a knee right there in front of everyone. If only it could have been Marcus...and he’d loved her since forever. What? Mercy! What was she thinking?

Her rose had faded and the petals were already falling off. She had cause to be filled with such romantic nonsense. That sort of life had already passed her by.

What an idiot she was! Her time was past, her husband gone, and for sure and for certain what she wanted, everything she truly needed lay right in front of her. A son or daughter—perhaps both—to fill the rest of her days with love.

Once everyone finished hugs, glad handing, and back slapping the happy couple, Rebecca pressed Gwendolyn in a tour of the orphanage.

Of course, as if her little sis enjoyed tormenting her again like a six-year-old—not that she knew Rebecca’s intentions—Gwendolyn seemed to take the long way to where the babies were housed.

Finally, she stood in the nursery’s doorway. Sunlight filled the cheerful room through a row of large windows with light, and cribs lined the walls on either side. Bright yellow curtains fluttered in the breeze coming in off the ocean.

Eight infants, in ages ranging from one to ten months, played on pallets or in their beds, and a couple more still slept, dreaming through morning naps.

One small guy lay across the lap of a matron who sat in one of the room's three rockers. Gwen placed a vertical index finger over her lips.

Though Rebecca wanted to stay right there and have an opportunity to coo and goo with each one, her tour guide—still totally unaware of her secret intentions—strolled toward a connecting door, whispering how the next room housed the older babies who only took afternoon naps.

What would Gwen say when she found out?

“Wait. I’m not ready to leave yet.”

Her sister returned and strolled more slowly beside her. As Rebecca took time to mosey between each of the baby beds, her sister passed along what she knew of each child in soft tones.

Hearing their stories...how they came to be orphans... enthralled her. She stopped at the forth little darling.

How could it be?

“We have a problem with this one.”

“No.” She tore her eyes away and faced her sister. “Why in the world...?”

Gwendolyn nodded toward the far corner where what looked to be a four-year-old sat, glaring. “Well, not so much with the baby, more with his big brother.”

Rebecca smiled at the boy then, as if her hands couldn’t control themselves, lifted the infant from its crib.

The older youngster jumped to his feet and charged. “Hey! Stop that! Put him down.”

Rebecca hugged the baby tighter and breathed in his sweet scent. She knelt as the urchin stormed forward with both fists balled, eyes blazing.

“Hi, there, little man. What’s your name?”

He stopped short of her and frowned. “Put him down, Miss Lady. Cain’t buy that baby. Him ain’t for sale. Him’s my brother.”

She scooted the baby to her left side then spread her right arm out. “Your brother? Well, how wonderful that he has you to look out for him. How about I hold you both?”

The boy’s shoulders drooped half an inch, maybe more. His fist un-balled, but his eyes still burned white hot. “Cain’t buy me neither. Ain’t for sale. We live here now.”

She grinned. How could she not love him?

The baby couldn’t look more like how she’d always pictured Wallace’s son might, and his big brother was obviously cut from the same cloth as her dead husband.

“Silly boy. Children aren’t for sale here.” She turned to her sister and played indignant. “Are they, Mis’ess Briggs?”

“No, of course not! We only want to find loving homes for our little ones; families to care for them and play with them. We’d never sell them. Never ever. No no no.”

The boy’s hands relaxed.

The intoxicating baby smell set her senses on edge, and she caught herself swooning a bit. Rebecca closed her eyes and kissed the baby’s head. When she opened them, the brother had moved closer.

His eyes, though not exactly trusting, no longer burned. His expression looked more curious...maybe with a tad of playfulness.

“Come on. Please? It’s just a hug.” She arched her eyebrows and put on a sad but sweet face. “It’s been a very long time since I had one.”

“Then you’ll put Rooster down?”

She nodded. “I promise.”

The child turned his head and walked into her one-armed embrace and wrapped his arms around her neck. “You stink good.”

What a left-handed compliment. Just like something Wallace would say, except her husband said such quite on purpose.

“Thank you.” She carried the brothers to the closest rocker and eased down. “Rooster, you say. Does your brother have another name?”

“Yep, a whole lot of them. Big Mama called him BabyBoy sometimes, and sometimes a word that lady there...” The little guy threw his chin toward Gwendolyn. “Says I can’t say, or I’ll get my mouth washed out again with lye soap. It tastes bad!”

“I imagine so.”

“And little Mama, she...” The boy shrugged. “She didn’t call him nothing before she run off.”

The baby twisted then kicked as if he needed some attention. Rebecca looked to her sister. “Does he need changing? When is his next feeding due?”

“Should be dry, but bottle time is getting close. Want to give it to him?”

“Would it be alright with you?” She looked to the baby’s big brother. “If I fed him before I put him back down?”

He frowned. “Guess so.”

“Want to help me?”

“Sure, but then you gots to put him back. Big Mama says he needs lots of sleep.”

It took all the milk and a man-sized burp to get the baby all satisfied and happy, but she rocked on, and soon both brothers slept soundly in her lap.

Never in the whole of her life had she been more certain or sure—even though she’d barely seen a quarter of the children. Those two

boys were coming home with her.

Daddy would love them.

With both of her soon-to-be-sons lying down together to finish their naps, she located her sister in the business office. Looked a lot like Daddy's library, except with a feminine flare—books aplenty filled the shelves that covered more than half of one wall, floor to ceiling.

Slipping into the far wingback, she put on her best poker face. "So what's the story on the Baby Rooster and his protector?"

"Brother Paul's not sure where the mother took off to. The grandmother passed about a month ago though. That's when we got them."

"And who is this Paul?"

"He's the preacher at the Methodist church we attend and the chairman of Mercy House's oversight board."

"Has anyone searched for their mother?"

"Not really. She's...uh...well...." Gwen shrugged. "Shall we say her reputation isn't stellar?"

"I see. What's the adoption process like? What all does it entail?"

"Oh, we interview the couple, talk with as many friends and family that we can, check them out. It really depends on if they're known around town or not. If we approve them, then the couple speaks before the board. It has the final say."

"Any costs?"

"Some, but not much. We're only concerned with the children's futures. It's amazing how God has provided. With the dairy and the older children helping, we pay our own way. Jethro Risen has a gift for inventing time-saving equipment, as you well know."

"Yes, of course."

"We have a fund to help folks out with the legal fees if you're so inclined to donate."

"Sure...if it'll help me."

"Help you?" Gwendolyn leaned back in her chair and looked so much like their mother it warmed Rebecca's heart. Her sister had acquired Mama's suspicious nature. "How could making a donation possibly help you? Exactly what does that mean?"

"Well, I want to adopt Rooster. And his big brother."

"What? Did you just say you wanted to adopt those two boys? As in take them home to Texas? Are you crazy? Rebecca, you don't even have a husband. You'd be going it all alone."

"Mama raised Levi and me alone for nine years until she married Daddy."

"But it's such a huge responsibility...I don't think it's anything to take on so lightly."

"But I'm not taking anything lightly at all. I've thought on it a

long time and prayed about it. That's a big reason why I came. That and being heartsick to see my sisters."

"What did Daddy and Mama May have to say about you adopting?"

"Nothing...yet. I haven't mentioned it to them. But they wouldn't change my mind, and neither will you."

Gwendolyn shook her head. "We've never adopted to a single lady before. I don't even know if it would be allowed."

"But you know I'd be a great mother. I'm convinced of it. What difference does it make that I don't have a husband? If Wallace and I adopted before the war, he'd still be just as dead." Tears sprang to fill her eyes.

"None I suppose. Maybe. I've got to talk with Mary Rachel and Jethro...and of course, the others, but..." She grinned. "You're right in that those two scalawags couldn't find a better mother. Aren't you living in the big house now? Would you stay there?"

"For now." She looked off out the window. The mountains certainly made for a beautiful backdrop. Wallace would love it. A heavy sigh escaped. "Anyway, Daddy's bound and determined to move to Llano. He's been sending loads of lumber almost weekly for the last month or so, and he and Levi are planning on going in the spring with a crew to start building."

"Is that so? Red River County won't be the same without him."

"Once he and Mama make the move, I thought I might buy Levi and Rose's place. They're wanting the big house. Need it, too, with all those Baylor young'uns who aren't all that little anymore."

"Well there's an idea. It's plenty big enough. Might not mention that you're planning on living by yourself with two boys though. You know how some men are, thinking we can't do a thing without some hairy leg galoot right there at all times. Might go better if you didn't mention moving out of the big house for now."

"Bless God that Daddy never fell in with the likes of such men. I've always loved it that he taught us all how to shoot and ride and do whatever needed to be done."

Gwen snickered. "I could have done without all that cotton picking though."

"Amen to that, Sister."

"So you're positive about this? That you want to saddle yourself with two little boys? Why not meet the rest of the children. Look for a daughter. Might make getting approved easier."

She wagged her head from side to side. "Yes, ma'am, and no, ma'am. I'm definitely sure about becoming a mother and certain that those two little fellows are mine. Just as sure I do not want to look further."

“Might go easier if you picked out a baby girl.”

“No, the baby looks exactly how I always pictured Wallace’s son, and the big brother puts me in mind of my dearly departed. It’ll be like having Mister Rusk as a boy. By the way, what’s his name?”

“No one knows, and he’s not saying. We’ve been calling him Big Brother.”

“Who named the baby Rooster?”

“He did. Bonnie reads to them, and after hearing Mama’s stories about the gentleman pirate, the boy’s been calling his brother Red Rooster. Sometimes just Red and sometimes, Rooster.”

Well, she’d change that soon enough. Would she want to saddle the big one with Wallace? Could the world stand two of them?



Ford dipped the bowl in the vinegar water, put it on the stack, then reached for another. Weren’t any. He did a three-sixty. Not a dirty pot or pan anywhere. He took off his apron and went to drying the stacks of dishes.

Once finished, he headed upstairs and found the Purser in his little cubby hole of an office. “I’m finished. Come for my money.”

The man nodded. “Cookie said you’s about done.” He pulled out a metal box, opened its lid, and pulled out three green backs and two silver half dollars. “If you need a berth going back, I can always use a good man.”

Ford pocketed the money, but didn’t comment. Wasn’t sure if washing dishes was worse than shoveling coal, but he’d just as soon walk back if he couldn’t stand a ticket. “Thank you, sir. Any idea when the next boat to shore’s due?”

“Last I saw, the barge was only half loaded. If you’re in a hurry, I’d catch a ride on that. The skiff is liable to be another hour or

better.”

“Yes, sir. Take care.” He backed out as there was hardly enough room to turn around.

Boredom put him to helping load the barge. Plus, anything to get to shore quicker. Then finally, he stood on San Francisco’s wharf. He found Broadway easily enough and followed his nose east, just like the map he’d memorized.

Only took him an hour or so to locate the Lone Star Mercantile.

The young lady behind the front counter couldn’t be Mary Rachel, not if Wallace Rusk had told it true. But he had to be in the right place. Couldn’t be two stores with the same name on the same street in the same town.

The female looked up. “Afternoon, anything I can help you find?”

“I’m looking for Rebecca Rusk. Her sister owns the Mercantile.

Any idea where I might find her?”

“And you would be?”

“A friend. Do you know her whereabouts? And if not, is Mary Rachel available?” He racked his brain trying to think who the young lady might be, but the sister’s mother’s namesake—Susie if he remembered, short for Susannah—couldn’t be old enough....

How old would the baby be? Ten or twelve at most.

The young lady eyed him hard. “I’ll fetch Mama, but only after you tell me your name, so what’s it going to be?”

A sassy young miss. It suddenly came to him. “I remember now. You’ve got to be Francy, right?”

“So fine. You know my name, but that doesn’t mean anything. So do half the people in this town. Maybe more. And I’m still not getting my mother until you tell who you are.”

The mental image Wallace painted of the young lady at nine hiding under boy’s clothes sure didn’t fit the lovely person standing before him, but the sass did.

“Marcus Ford, Major Marcus Ford. I served with Wallace Rusk and Levi Baylor under General Buckmeyer’s command, and I think I’ll call you Shorty. I like that better than Francy.”

The young lady grinned. “Best not. I can hit like a boy.”

“Hmm. Francy it is, then—if you’ll tell me where I can find your Aunt Rebecca.”

“Isn’t here. She’s at Mercy House Orphanage. Been there better than a week now.”

“And how do I find this place?”

“Well, it’s south of town. About five miles out.”

Picturing the map he’d been studying, he mentally matched the directions the young lady gave and decided he could find it. He tipped

his hat—except he didn't have one—picked up his grip and bundle of canvases, then headed out.

He'd followed her for over two thousand miles. What was another seven or eight? At a forced march he'd be there in less than three hours. He'd see Mary Rachel later. Only one woman he couldn't wait to feast his eyes on again.

Once on the street, his heart conspired with his feet and put him at double time. Way before the city gave way to the countryside, Ford slowed, but refused his legs any break, did allow a half-mile or so of short stepping a bit, just to change things up.

Then he was there.

The huge arch over the front gate announced 'Mercy House.'

A grand main structure guarded an even bigger barn. A lush pasture dotted with fat black and white cows surrounded both. Picture perfect, but nowhere in sight was the vision of loveliness he came to see.

Oh, how he longed to feast his eyes on his love's face again.

His love. Except...was she?

Setting his bag and bundle of canvases on the front porch, he tried the door. Locked. Tapped on the glass, and went suddenly dry-mouthed. What was he doing? What a bona fide lunatic he'd turned into.

A pull string hung on the jam. He drew it downward, and a faint tinkle sounded somewhere in the distance. He refused the desire to yank it harder. Surely someone would come. For all they knew inside, he'd come to drop off a foundling infant.

Finally—mercifully—the door opened, revealing an older lady who looked rather perplexed. "Sir? Do you have an appointment? No one informed me. And I'm certain nothing was written down."

"I, uh...."

"Where's your mis'sses?" The matron looked past him. "And your carriage?" She glanced downward with some disdain on her face. "Is that your bag and bundle?"

Because of the alarm in her voice, Ford backed away a step. "Yes, ma'am. That's my grip, and no, ma'am, I did not have an appointment. My wife and baby girl died of the fever back in '53."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." She eased the door toward shut. "Well, I'm sorry you came all this way, but we're not buying anything. Good day, sir."

"Wait, ma'am. You see, I'm a friend of Rebecca Rusk. That's why I'm here. I've come to speak with her." His face warmed, and a wave of stupid washed over him.

"May I say whose calling?"

"I'd, uh, prefer to surprise her. I've come a long way. She thinks

I'm in Nashville." He flashed his best little boy grin.

The lady studied him for a dozen booms of his heart. "Are you a man of honor, sir?"

"I am. Yes. I assure you." He smiled his biggest, best grin and hoped it looked sincere.

Ah, the woman returned it, gesture then nodded. "Well, alright then. But you wait here on the porch. I'll fetch her."

The seconds seemed like minutes or longer. Had he made a horrible mistake in coming? No. Didn't matter if he played the part of the fool, he had to know.

The door creaked as it swung open. His love stood there...at last in his presence again.

For a heartbeat or two, she just stared. Then a scratchy scream escaped. "Marcus?" Wide-eyed, she cleared her throat. "What in the world...are...you...." She flung herself at him, catching him a bit off guard, but he caught her and held her.

Her lips pressed against his.

She did care.

He wrapped her tight and kissed her back.

Rebecca loved him. He hadn't been wrong. This proved it.



What had she done? Rebecca put her hands on his chest and pushed back.

He released her.

"Oh my! Marcus, please forgive me. I can't imagine what came over me. That was so inappropriate. I'm so sorry."

Then he flashed that grin she'd replayed a million times on the stage of her mind where lived her crazy and unfitting infatuation with the man. He reached out and touched her cheek. "Don't be. I'm not."

"Where? How....?" She glanced behind her. Bless God that no one witnessed her complete meltdown, making a fool of herself. Why...she was worse than a trollop. "How'd you get here? Did they turn you down in Nashville?"

"Didn't go."

"Why not?"

"Because of you."

"Me?"

"When you left Jefferson, I realized what a fool I'd been. I should have asked you to stay...wasn't ready to be parted. After your steamer disappeared...I tried to get on with my life. I did...but..."

His sky blue eyes sparkled, and she almost swooned, trying to

keep herself under control, her composure intact.

“Out of the blue, a waitress told me about her brother needing pole men going to New Orleans.” His smile widened. “I just missed you there.”

“That was you standing on the wharf! I could’ve sworn I... But I knew it couldn’t be. Or at least thought...”

“Yes, it was, and it broke my heart anew being so close yet watching you go...again.” He took a step back. “I have something for you.”

Digging in his bag, he pulled out two roundish objects encased in newsprint, and it appeared more like they waited in the case. He handed her the bigger of the two.

“What is it?”

“Unwrap it. You’ll see.”

The paper unfolded easily. A hand-painted, porcelain teapot. How odd. “It’s exquisite, Marcus. Where’d you get it?”

“Took it for pay. I painted it, you see. Just after your ship sailed and the next one didn’t leave for three days, so I went to my dad’s old shop. The lady who’d bought it from my mother hired me, but...”

“That makes it even more lovely.”

With a bit of blush, he shrugged and unwrapped the second bundle of newsprint. “There’s six matching cups with saucers. And a creamer and sugar bowl with a lid. It’s a whole set.”

He smiled like the Cheshire cat. The man was so cute!

“Oh, dear Marcus. I’ll treasure it, truly. What was the but? The lady hired you, but what?”

Waving her off, he shook his head side to side. “She didn’t have enough cash, and I didn’t want to wait on it, so I got it for you. Then I almost had to sell them in Panama City. I hated the thought...”

“Oh, really? What happened?”

“I found the money you’d put in my Bible. I even considered selling that, too. Short of a steamer ticket, I’d have sold the shoes off my feet.” He picked up the cloth-draped rectangle bundle next to his carpet bag.

“Well bless the Lord.”

“If you want, guess you just did. I was offered thirty dollars for this, but I couldn’t bear the thought of parting with it, shoes or none.” He untied the string, holding what appeared to be a towel in place, then exposed the canvas.

Her breath caught. “Oh, Marcus. It’s exquisite. She’s beautiful. If only I looked like that.” She swallowed then remembered to breathe.

His laughter fractured her astonishment. “No, dear Rebecca. This painting is a poor second to the real you. And even more than your physical beauty is your heart of gold.”

“I’m so...” She tore her eyes away from the portrait to his face. “So flattered, and...so very glad to see you again.”

A familiar tug yanked her skirt. She looked down to her little cherub.

“Mama, who’s him?”



So she’d found her son.

The handsome young lad with an angelic face peered at him. He knelt and wanted to introduce himself as his new father. Would that be too big a presumption? Possibly.

“Hi, I’m Major Ford. What’s your name?”

The little guy wrinkled his nose, pursed his lips, and shook his head. “Ain’t saying. What am a major?”

What a cutie, acting all tough. How could you not like the little man? “An officer in the army, though I’m not anymore. But your mama’s daddy was General Buckmeyer, and I fought in his brigade during the war.”

The boy looked at Rebecca. “Him did, Mama? You know him?”

“Yes, Michael. He’s my friend, Marcus.” She touched the tip of his nose. “Mister Ford to you.” The lady tousled the little fellow’s hair then picked him up and sat him on her hip. “Would you like to introduce our friend to Gabriel?”

The boy shrugged then buried his face in his new mother’s shoulder.

Ford stood and grinned. “So. You decided on two?”

She nodded and held the door open with her free hand.

Mercy House seemed like a well-oiled machine to Ford. Every child spit polished, well fed, and happy as far as he could tell. The

boy's baby brother seemed just as fat and sassy as the rest.

Two sons, a ready-made family. Fine with him so long as he had their mother's hand in his. He'd take the two little scalawags on without a word.

His soul mate, the love of his life. If only it had been his fate to come across Rebecca the day he found Julia, his heart could've been spared so much grief. But then...he probably would have had to kill Wallace Rusk.

With Levi Baylor watching his back, that wouldn't have proved an easy row to hoe.

Finally, when the brothers had full stomachs, a bath, and lay bedded for the night, he had her all to himself in the front parlor. Of course, her sisters were in the next room with the adjoining door open.

Heaven forbid their big sis should be in his company unchaperoned. He'd like nothing better than holding her in his arms again.

Instead, she poured from her new teapot. He took a sip then set down the cup on its matching saucer that rested on the fancy side table. Proud he'd hung onto the set and resisted selling it.

Of course...only due to her generosity. For once in his life, opening the Bible had come through for him.

The lady of his heart sat the padded Queen Anne across from him. He leaned back a bit. "How long you planning on staying in San Francisco?"

Gently blowing her tea, she held the cup with both hands below her chin. "It depends. I've filled out all the paperwork and hired an attorney to help me adopt the boys, but Mercy House has a board of directors. Those men have the final say. I've got to go before them next, then visit with the judge. Maybe three...four more weeks. If it all works out, I'll travel home with Bonnie and Jasper."

"Jasper? As in Private Briggs?"

"One and the same. The boy's been in love with my sister forever, and..." She grinned then proceeded to tell him about the general enlisting the young man to watch over Rebecca on the way there.

Ford loved the way she told the story of how she and the old lady got the drop on him.

She giggled, covered her gorgeous mouth, then shook her head. "If I live to be a hundred, I'll never forget the look in Jasper's eyes when he turned around with me holding my pistol on him."

"I always liked that boy. All the Briggs for that matter. Good men and good soldiers."

"You know that his Uncle Clay married my sister Gwendolyn, right?"

"I do." If only he were saying those words to her before a judge with the authority vested to pronounce him man and Rebecca, his wife.

She took another sip of tea. "And what are your plans? Were you thinking to apply to St. Mary's or Heald College as a professor?"

"No." He laughed. "I don't think the sisters would take kindly to such a sinner teaching tomorrow's generation. All I could think of was you, Rebecca. Seeing you again. Now that I have, I'm more sure than I've ever been about anything. Let's get married, and we'll figure the rest out later."

"Is that supposed to be a proposal, Marcus Ford? How romantic!" The sarcasm in her voice told him he'd been wrong to blurt it out.

He instantly regretted his impulsiveness.

After clearing her throat as though she realized how harsh she'd sounded, she shook her head. "If I were to agree to your rash idea, I definitely would not want to marry here. And most certainly would never consider marrying without Daddy's blessing."

Well, at least her no was conditional...wasn't it? "So...is that a yes once the General blesses our union?"

Both shoulders bobbed half an inch. "My dear Marcus, I do admit that I thought of little else the whole way here. I could not get you out of my head. But we've spent a total of...what? Thirty hours together?"

"Seems like more."

"Even if, I hardly think that qualifies as enough time to know one another and make such an important, life-long commitment. We need —"

"What? What do we need, sweet lady? The way you kissed me spoke volumes."

"An imprudent mistake. You surprised me so. And if you'll remember, I immediately asked you to forgive me."

"What's to forgive? Nothing at all. If you're concerned that I'd take liberties, I never would."

"No, of course not."

"The whole time from the minute you went out of sight that we were apart, I couldn't think of anyone or anything but you. In Panama City, I was short of cash for a steamer ticket, figured I'd paint a nice landscape to sell to some well-heeled traveler."

"You could have, you know. Your talent is a gift from God."

"I don't know about that, but when I got my pigments and canvas out, all I could paint was that portrait of you. No matter what I did—not that I tried very hard—I couldn't get you out of my heart or my mind's eye. What difference does it make how long we've known each other? My heart knows what it wants."

"That's simplifying it quite a bit."

“Well, what’s your heart telling you?”

“A heart is an impetuous organ, Marcus.”

“But what more do you need to know about me? Other than I’m madly in love with you, Rebecca? And that what I desire above all is to spend the rest of my life making you happy.”



Indeed, what more could a lady want? She didn’t have to ask herself twice. His salvation, that’s what. She could never yoke herself to any man who wasn’t a believer. Rebecca patted his hand.

How many times had some galoot vowed that he loved her? That she shone brighter than the sun or sweeter than honey.

But Marcus was different.

And truth was, she’d thought about not much other than the man the whole time they’d been apart...until she met her boys. They’d helped divert her attentions. And that’s exactly what she needed to do now. Distract him, change the subject.

“So do you have a room? Anywhere to stay?”

He shook his head.

“We figured as much. Gwen says you can bunk in the barn and help with the milking in the morning.”

“Great. I can do that.”

Standing, she stretched her back. “Well, they start around four. We best be turning in.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“That was quite intentional. Besides, you really didn’t ask the question. You only made a suggestion. I need time, Marcus. Right now, I need to focus on those two boys. They’ve got to be who’s most important to me.”

“I understand.” But his expression did not appear as though he did. “Walk me out?”

She glanced at the open door. “Best not.”

He grinned. “I understand.”

“You said that already. But I’m not so sure of it.”

That night, she dreamed of a life as Mis’ess Marcus Ford, but in the dawn of the new day, it all came back to the fact that he did not have a relationship with God. He’d already be up, and she trembled with the thought of seeing him again.

How crazy was that? As if she could just walk blissfully to an altar and say, ‘I do.’ He had come all that way. Said he would’ve followed her to the ends of the earth.

Still, just as her mother before her, she couldn’t. Not with a non-

believer. How true that the generations repeated. Her dear sister had paid a high price for disobedience. Mary Rachel had suffered for her bad choice...though God redeemed her in the end.

It's a wise woman who can learn from another's mistakes. That's what Mama always said. Rebecca should not, would not unequally yoke herself—no matter that the whole of her being wanted the handsome major. What the heart wanted indeed!

What she knew in her heart of hearts mattered.

Marrying him could only lead to disaster—for her and her sons—if she succumbed.

Brushing her hair, she smiled in the mirror. Her sons. She loved the sound of that. How natural it sounded, and she loved being a mother. The position suited her.

Then a thought struck. One that certainly would suit Marcus so much better than tending to livestock. And, it'd keep him near. Perhaps she'd discover a debilitating flaw or... Who was she joshing?

Her heart conspired with her thoughts to bring that idea to mind. She wanted to be around the man. Period.

As fast as possible, she dressed then headed straight out to the barn even before going to see her sons who probably—she hoped—were not even up yet. Found him mucking the stalls, as though just another field hand.

Hanging back, she enjoyed watching him work. Not a drip of slack in the man she could see.

Spiking his shovel into the full pushcart, he spotted her and grinned. "Good morning."

"Yes, it is, isn't it? You about through?"

After pushing the cart to the manure hole, he grabbed its pull rope, emptied it, then tugged it into the next stall. "Almost." He went back to work.

She drew close, but not too. The dirty hay, soaked with urine and manure smell, didn't sting her nose too bad, but who wanted any part of it on their shoes or dress?

"Is there someone else who can finish that? I'd like to speak with you before the boys start their day."

Leaving the latest scoopful in the cart along with the shovel, he shrugged, then headed back into the stall. "Told 'em I'd do it; everyone else is busy somewhere else, but I can take a breather. What's on your mind, pretty lady?"

She should tell him her idea then, but since he'd given his word... Why make an issue of it? Besides, perhaps she should talk with Gwen first, though her sister surely wouldn't object. "No...go ahead. It can wait. Have you eaten?"

"A couple of hours ago." He picked up the shovel again, grinning.

“Some of us have been up a while. What about you?”

“No, I haven’t even had any coffee yet. This idea hit me, and I wanted to discuss with you, but go ahead and finish what you’re doing there. Will you come find me once you’re through?”

“Be my pleasure.”

She turned and hurried back toward the big house. Until that very moment, it hadn’t occurred to her there’d been no chaperone in the barn. Not that she needed one.

Still.

Heaven forbid, it getting back to Daddy that she and Marcus had been alone. A big smile spread across her face. Henry Buckmeyer wouldn’t like it, no matter how old she got.



Standing in the barn’s hallway, knowing full well that he gawked until she strolled out of sight, he experienced no shame. Ford loved the way she walked. Everything about the lady stirred him.

She’d obviously awakened with him on her mind, for her to hunt him down so early of a morning. Even before coffee.

But...he’d given his word, so instead of washing up and running after her, he got back to his mucking.

Soon enough, he sipped coffee across the kitchen table from the object of his affection as she eased tiny spoons full of mashed oats into the baby’s mouth.

The bigger brother held a fork over his three-quarter-eaten plate of eggs and biscuits covered with milk gravy. The kid seemed too busy eyeing Ford to finish his own breakfast.

“Come on, Gabriel. One more bite.” Rebecca tapped the baby’s bottom lip with a spoonful of the mush. “Are you getting full?”

“Him don’t want no more of that stuff, Mama.” He looked to Ford. “Gots any candy?”

His mama pulled the spoon back and looked to the boy. “Michael. You should not ask our friend or anyone for candy. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am.” The boy glanced back at him as if seeking relief from her chastisement.

“You haven’t been giving your baby brother sweets, have you?”

“No, ma’am.” The little big guy shrugged then smiled rather sheepishly. “Ain’t got no candy to give anyone, but if him does....”

She glared at the boy with pursed lips until he looked away. With a quick glance at Ford, she let one corner of her mouth slip up the slightest bit. She set the baby’s spoon back into the bowl then stood.

“What about you, Michael? Are you through eating?”

He put his fork down rather hard with too loud of a bang. "Yep, unless him gots candy."

"Yep?"

"I mean, 'yes ma'am."

"That's better, but no sweets now. Maybe later. We'll see."

He jumped up, neared his brother, and held his miniature hands out. "Want me to burp him?"

"No, sir, but thank you for offering. I was going to feed him a bottle first. How about you go see what Miss Bonnie is doing? I need to talk with the Major."

For a few heartbeats, Michael glared at him then turned and ran into the other room.

Rebecca lifted the baby from his highchair then carried him to the sink and daubed at his mouth with a damp dishcloth. She retrieved a glass bottle from the sterilizing pot, filled it half full of milk from a smaller pan on the stove, retook her seat, then cradled the baby until he latched contentedly to the nipple.

"So. Get all of your stalls cleaned out?"

"Yes, ma'am, and ready to hear all about this idea of yours."

"Well, I was thinking this morning that while you're here... Perhaps we could put your talents to better use than tending livestock."

"Glad to do whatever I can to help. What do you have in mind?"

"Bible stories."

With no intent, his face screwed up, and he straightened it as quickly as he could, cleared his throat, and shrugged. "What of them?"

The next few minutes, the lady laid out her idea. The only thing he liked about it proved to be the prospect of her presence being nearer than possible with him in the barn.

"So what do you think?" She rocked with a satisfied expression, so clearly pleased with herself.

"Will you help me?"

Her eyes widened as if his request surprised her. "Of course. But how?"

He had her then. "You'll see."



The playroom's door swung open, and she marched in, raised her chin a bit, and stared at him. Ford couldn't believe how cute Rebecca looked with her blond curls trussed up in a bandana and a man's work shirt over her dress.

If he thought he could get away with it, he'd daub a splash of paint on her nose just to complete the picture she painted on his heart.

Oh, how he loved the beautiful creature. Her expression looked so serious and concerned over the project he roped her into.

His endeavor included brightening the room with a big tree in the corner for a rendition of the first Bible story. Maybe a few animals scattered around the room. His sweetheart insisted she couldn't draw her way out of a paper bag, but admitted to being a semi-talented colorer.

"Fine. You got me here, now what?"

With the piece of charcoal in his hand, he pointed to her right. "See that tree I've sketched there? Fill in the trunk and branches with the brown paint in that jar." He nodded toward a cluster of pots in the corner, each filled with the colors he'd freshly mixed.

Stepping closer, she studied his outline for a bit then glanced back. "What if I mess it up? It's looking so good already."

"If you do, I can fix it. But you won't. Trust me. You'll do fine, just stay in the lines. You said you could do that, right?"

Hard to believe that she stuck out her tongue. Right at him. "Yes, smarty britches. I can stay in the lines." Her words carried such mirth.

They made him a little giddy. He loved so many things about her, especially this little girl side he hadn't seen before. And it wouldn't be necessary at all to paint Eve from memory, not when he had Rebecca right there with him. She didn't realize what he was doing until the day was almost done.

Returning with a handful of freshly cleaned brushes, she joined him in the middle of the room where he stood studying the mural.

“Oh, Marcus.”

He bumped his shoulder against hers. “You just now noticing?”

“Yes. Why did you make me Eve?”

“Had to.” He tilted his chin toward a clump of greenery. “I mean, if I was Adam....”



In awe of the man’s talent, Rebecca stood beside him, speechless. Only a few hours’ time, and he’d created a scene right out of Genesis. His interpretation of the sweet lamb practically kissing the magnificent lion took her breath.

The shades he’d used. She bumped his shoulder back, wanting to do so much more, but that was all polite decorum would allow.

“How long do you think it will take to finish this one?”

“Two more days. Three at the most.”

“Good. I love it. I truly do. I was thinking Noah and the Ark for the nursery, and what do you think about David as a boy sitting on a rock in the pasture—sheep all around—playing a harp for the music room?”

“Isn’t he the guy that killed the giant?”

“Yes, indeed. But he cut off Goliath’s head. Let’s not do that one. They have enough trouble with some of older boys as it is.”

“Whatever you want, so long as you help.”

“Good.” She nodded toward the door. “Let’s get washed up. Supper should be about ready.”

The next ten days proved exhilarating. Akin to the time she’d spent helping her parents build the big house. Except that took so much longer, and the work way harder.

Then word came that the board of directors would meet with her in two days, and the joy of helping Marcus turned to apprehension.

Late the night before the dreaded day, she found Gwendolyn in the kitchen, having a cup of tea with Clay. She liked her brother-in-law well enough, but didn’t particularly want to have a three-way conversation with the young man.

It took two kicks to her sister’s foot and a toss of her eyebrows toward the door before her sister got the message.

As soon as he disappeared, Gwen faced her. “What is it?”

“I’m in knots.”

“Why? What’s got you upset? Marcus?”

“No! Not at all. It’s...tomorrow.”

“The board meeting? Don’t be silly.”

“What if they turn me down? Those boys are already mine no matter what they say.”

“Quit your worrying.” She smiled. “They won’t.”

“Do you know that for sure?”

“Well, no, not exactly. But how could they possibly not approve you? It’s clear to anyone who’s been around that you’ll make those two a wonderful mother. It’s so obvious that you love them.”

“I do, I truly do. It’s even amazed me how much.”

“And there’s been such an improvement in little Michael. He’s a different child since you came. Before, all he wanted to do was sit the corner and watch over his brother. Now he spends most of his time playing with the other boys.”

Tracing a cut in the tabletop with her nail, she considered how her precious boy had changed. “But he’s still wetting the bed...and having nightmares.”

“Relax. You know what Mama said about worrying.”

“I do, and I hate being so anxious.”

“There’s no reason to. Besides, you do have a man on the inside.”

“But I’ve only been around Jethro Risen a couple of times. Him being my brother-in-law might....” She filled her lungs then blew it all out. “I’ll tell you right now and tell you true. I cannot stand the thought of not taking Michael and Gabriel home with me.”

Gwen patted her hand. “Well, every man sitting on that board only wants the very best for our children, and you, my dear, are the best thing that’s ever happened to those two boys. Go on to bed and get a good night’s sleep. Let tomorrow take care of itself.”

She stood. “Easy for you to say.”

The next morning dragged so that she thought dinner might never come. She’d painstakingly dressed, only changing three times.

Even being with Marcus didn’t help pass the time. He’d been so understanding about her begging off helping that day, but he even set her free from her promise to sit in there with him.

Spending time with her sons proved the only thing that made a difference, but she didn’t want to disrupt their day with any of her anxiety. Of course, they knew nothing about the meeting that could change their lives. She’d tell them the good news once it had been finally decided.

And if the decision that she hoped for didn’t come back...well...then...they would simply have to reconsider. That’s all.

She couldn’t, wouldn’t go back to Texas without her sons.

Prayer helped, too. She took a walk along the whitewashed fence, talking to the Lord as she went. Then it struck her. It made no difference what those men said. Those boys were hers. Period.

No matter what the board of directors said. If she couldn't take Michael and Gabriel to Texas, then she'd stay there in California. The only thing they had control over was which state she'd live in.

Then, just as much as that realization eased her mind, another thought attacked her senses and froze her heart with fear. What if they gave the boys—her boys—to someone else? A family.

A real one with a husband and a wife. Could her not having a husband cause them to do such a ghastly, unforgivable thing?

Marcus! He would marry her. Surely, he would.

Suddenly, a dark shadow encompassed her. She looked toward the sky. A cloud passed overhead between her and the sun. "I know, Lord. I won't."

The sun's brilliance returned, and she took it as a sign. Marrying him could not be an option, not so long as he remained a heathen. Who else could she marry? One of her sisters must know a nice Christian man in San Francisco.

Another cloud passed overhead. What was she thinking? A loveless marriage would never do for her sons.

Her insides tumbled and tossed and twisted and told her she had only one choice.

If she didn't turn it over to God and trust Him to do what was right to keep her in His will, then she'd certainly go crazy.

"Father, God. You know how very much I love You, and that I do trust You. In my heart of hearts, I know You sit on Your throne in Heaven and are in complete control of every detail in my life. You wouldn't have brought me all the way here with the idea of giving an orphan a home, then let me fall in love with my little Michael and sweet Gabriel...."

Her eyes filled with tears, and she knew. Inside, she knew. She had to choose Him and His will over everything in her that screamed she couldn't live without those two little boys.

"Daddy God, You know how much I love them, need them, and how much they need me, but...I leave it all to You." She could hardly form the words she must pray.

"Father, not my will but Yours be done." There. She'd done it. "You know what's best, and I trust you with my heart, my sons, and all that I am."

A peace settled over it that the decision was in the hands of a source much higher than Mercy House's Board.

Dinner came and went, and she managed to get a few bites down before finding herself in Gwendolyn's office, facing five men. She sat on one side, her inquisitors in a semicircle across from her.

Each man in turn introduced himself, wearing a pleasant enough expression, but none of them seemed really friendly—not even Jethro.

The gentleman in the middle, the one who called himself Brother Paul, spoke first. "Mis'ess Rusk, I apologize that it's taken us so long to get to this point. I'm sure you know that we've never had a widow apply before, so...."

"Yes, sir. I'd asked my sister."

The preacher glanced to the men on either side then back to her. "We're in new territory here. Please bear with us while we try to find our way to the best outcome possible for those two boys."

"Yes, sir, of course." She stiffened her back and looked him dead in his eyes. "I not only understand, but find myself in full agreement."

"First thing, are you a believer?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Absolutely, sir." A rush of calm, easy, amity blew over her. "I asked Jesus into my heart as a child. I've been His since I was eight."

"Baptized?"

"Yes, sir. A large group of my neighbors on the prairie back home in Texas gathered for a baptismal service in the Red River right before that summer's fish fry."

"And your husband died in the war?"

"Yes, sir." No reason to tell everything she knew, that his stubbornness killed him, not a Yankee bullet. Would that make a difference?

"Tell us about Marcus Ford."

What? Marcus? What did he have to do with any of this? She filled her lungs then nodded. "Yes, sir. I met the Major on the stage between Mount Pleasant and Jefferson in October when I began my trip here. He'd served in my father's brigade during the war, bunked with my husband who had also been a major. You might say we hit it off."

"I see."

She shrugged. "He planned on going to Nashville. Said he had an interview for a teaching position at the university there."

"But...his plans changed?"

"Yes, I suppose they did, although I had no idea. I guess he decided to follow me here instead."

"You say you hit it off. Could you please explain to the board what that means? Exactly."

Her scalp tingled, and her dander wanted nothing more but to rise, but she kept her composure. Her boys' future depended on it. These men had a right to quiz her.

"It means, sir, that we were—and are, to be completely truthful—attracted to each other. I've found Marcus Ford to be a man of the highest integrity, and I would never do anything to dishonor my heavenly Father or my earthly father."

Brother Paul nodded as though he accepted her answer. "What are your plans with the man?"

Would loving Marcus help her cause? She couldn't lie. Only the truth would do. All of the breath left her with a heavy sigh. "He's ask me to marry him, sir...but...at this time, he isn't a believer. I cannot, will not, unequally yoke myself."

All the men's heads bobbed to some degree. She hoped in favor of what she'd said. It seemed so, though Brother Paul appeared to tense up.

"There's another matter we need to discuss." The man looked over her head. Was he blushing?

"You may ask me anything, sir. I'll answer any question to have the honor of being Michael and Gabriel's mother."

"Uh." He cleared his throat, covering his mouth as if it were a cough. "It's about...the time of life, ma'am. Uh -"

"No, sir. I'm not that old yet. I turned forty-two my last birthday."

Smiling, he nodded. "The reason I ask...if you and Mister Ford were to marry—at some point in the future—then have a child of your own, it's been our experience the adopted children suffer."

She shook her head. "Never. That will not happen. Number one, Marcus blames God for the death of his first wife and baby. They succumbed to the yellow fever during the New Orleans epidemic."

"I see." Was that all he knew to say? Did he really see? Could he?

"Well, though my dearly departed always blamed himself for us not having any children, I can't know that for a fact it was him and not myself."

"Yes, but if...."

"If God, in His great mercy, blesses me with these two boys, then at any future time chooses to give me another child, then I would count all three His best blessings of my life, sir."

"I see."

"I'd never show any difference, for I know I couldn't love a third child any more than I already love my Michael and Gabriel. No, a pregnancy would not affect how much I love my sons."

"I'm the oldest of five sisters and two brothers. Never once did I stop loving any of them, or love any of them less, because another came along."

Her bother-in-law spoke up. "Rebecca, if we allow the adoption, where would you be living?"

"I plan on going back to Texas. Traveling with my sister Bonnie and her new husband. For now, the boys and I will live with Daddy and Mama May, but he's hankering to move to Llano. That's south, a few hundred miles in the Texas hill country. Levi and Rose."

She faced the other men one at a time as she spoke. Mama taught

her to look other people in their eyes. Let them know you see them.

“He’s my cousin by birth but more a brother. He and his wife want to buy the big house. I’ve thought about buying their place. It’d be better suited for the boys and me. But nothing is settled. I could build on the ranch.”

Her brother-in-law nodded and glanced around at his cohorts. “I know the place.” Then he faced her again. “Two boys by yourself...not so much now as when they’re older...you’d be taking on a handful.”

“I wouldn’t be alone. My father and brother have been very astute in business, and I’m a full partner. The ability to hire all the help I might need isn’t a problem, and I will. Still, with a family as big ours, there will be ample menfolk to help in anyway needed. Houston, Chester, Charley, Bart...to name a few.”

“Any other questions, gentlemen?” Paul looked both directions, no one responded.

“Thank you, Mis’ess Rusk. If you’d be so kind as to step out, we’ll let you know of our decision shortly.”

“Today? Oh, that will be wonderful! Thank you.” She stood, smiled at each man, then walked out. Perhaps she shouldn’t have told them what she’d decided, about going back to Texas, but that might sway them in the wrong direction.

If they found against her taking the boys home, she could apply again, promising to raise them right there in California.

Gwen, Bonnie, Clay, and Jasper waited on one side of the outer room. Even Mary Rachel waited with them, and Marcus sat a wingback in the far corner. She wanted him, to hug her tell her everything would be fine.

But that wouldn’t do. Instead she faced her family and smiled best she could.

Gwendolyn stood. “What did they say?”

“That they would let me know something shortly.”



Time! What was taking so much of it?

Rebecca stood, stepped to the window, then sat back down. What was holding them up? She turned toward Gwendolyn. "How long has it been?"

She elbowed her husband. Clay pulled a watch from his vest pocket. "Twenty-two minutes."

Rebecca shook her head. "I'm certain you mean an hour and twenty-two minutes, don't you?"

Before her brother-in-law could correct his mistake, the door opened. Jethro Risen held it out. "Rebecca, would you be so kind as to join us?"

She couldn't read the man's face. He didn't look like the bearer of good news...no hearty smile. But his tone wasn't conciliatory either. She glanced at Marcus who offered an encouraging grin. If only the decision had been his, she'd be a shoe-in.

Stiffening her back, she marched in. "Of course."

The men stood and Brother Paul gestured toward the same chair she'd sat before. "Have a seat, Mis'ess Rusk."

She did, but couldn't relax.

The preacher leaned in a bit. "If we don't allow you to adopt the two boys, ma'am—being alone and all—what are your plans?"

"I'll stay right here with my sons. I will not abandon them. Though I much prefer rearing them under the open skies of the Texas prairie." She filled her lungs. Why was he asking that question? Should she ask? Had they decided against her? He did say if... She should say something or....

"And what if we felt it might be best to award only the older boy? One child would be easier."

“I’d still stay here. I will not leave either, and I can hardly imagine you gentlemen would separate those brothers. I certainly could not. When I first came, Michael only wanted to sit the corner and watch over Gabriel.

“They’re family, sir. He loves his little brother. I could not live with myself if I were the cause of separating them. Besides, I love that baby, too.”

“I see.”

“And...” She cleared her throat and choked back a flood. “I think the little darling loves me, too. He smiles when I sing to him, touches my face... No. I couldn’t leave him. In my heart, those boys are mine.

“I can’t explain it, but from the first moment I laid eyes on them—I’d intended to look around more, see all the children—but in an instant, the Lord bonded my heart.”

“We understand, Mis’ess Rusk, that you’re lonely and need a distraction to fill your –”

“Distraction!” She stood. “Do you think that’s what those boys are to me? That could not be any further from the truth. I’ve prayed about this for months! I’m telling you all, God has given me those boys, no matter what you are to decide.”

Suddenly, Jethro stood next to her, patting her back.

She sniffed then looked around at each man, pleading with her eyes. “Please, gentlemen. You hold my life in your grip.”

“Won’t you sit, Rebecca?” Jethro pulled her chair out a bit.

“Believe that we are torn over this decision and only want what’s best for you and the boys.”

Searching his eyes, she begged. “Then give them to me, Brother. I am what is best for them.” She sat again.

Brother Paul stood. “Well, Mis’ess Rusk that is exactly what I have decided to do. The board is recommending that the court allows you to adopt both boys.”

“You have?” Tears filled her eyes and she made no attempt to restrain them. You’re approving me? The adoption?”

On her feet, she hurried to each. She wanted to laugh, kiss every one of the galoots, but instead she took their hands one at a time into both of hers and shook their arms practically off. “Thank you! Bless you! You’ve made me the happiest woman in the world!”

They’d said yes!

She hugged Jethro then sniffed and wiped and blinked and giggled until the tears were gone. “Thank you, sirs. You will never regret this. I will be the best mother ever to those boys.”

Her brother-in-law took her by the shoulders. “Now, you know that the judge has the final say.”

“Yes, sir, of course.” A squeal escaped. “I’m so happy!” Then that

one last final step tempered her enthusiasm. “My attorney says he always goes with you gentlemen’s recommendations.”

“Well, so far, but...” The preacher smiled. “I will keep you and our boys in my prayers.”



Marcus caught some of Rebecca’s elation, but more so, a growing nag that the boys would take too much of his love’s attention. While the sisters went on and on, Jethro Risen sidled up next to him.

“A word?”

“Sure.” Marcus glanced at Rebecca—she wouldn’t miss him, that shone clear—then let the man lead him into the adjacent room.

“You have an impressive talent, sir. The murals are breathtaking. We couldn’t be more pleased.”

“Thank you.” He looked through the open door. The sisters still clustered around her.

“Don’t know how long you’re planning on staying, but I’d like to hire you.”

He turned his full attention to the man. “What did you have in mind?”

“Commissioning a family portrait.”

That could take weeks. Marcus shrugged. “My future is uncertain....”

“We have plenty of extra room. Mary Rachel and I were thinking perhaps you would want to accompany Rebecca and the boys to town when the time came.”

“Thank you for the offer.”

“It’s my understanding you aren’t charging us for your work here—other than room and board. But that will not be the case if you’ll agree to do this for us. Mary Rachel has her heart set on it.”

“What if she doesn’t like it?”

“Not a consideration. We’ve seen your work. Would three hundred be adequate? Plus your expenses, of course. And room and board for the duration. How does that sound?”

“Like a lot of money.”

Jethro stuck out his hand. “Deal then?”

Marcus glanced over the man’s shoulder and caught her watching him. Suddenly, he knew what was afoot. She smiled and nodded. He looked back at the man he hoped would soon be his brother-in-law and grasped then shook his hand. “Deal.”



Time couldn't have played into her hands any better.

The judge agreed to see her within the week, and the paperwork that made her a mother...a real live, bona fide mother...got filed at the county courthouse, making her the happiest woman alive. She and Wallace should have done it years ago.

It saddened her that he never experienced the joy of being a parent.

Not convinced either way about Marcus' true leanings over being a father again, she sighed. He'd make a good one...if only....

The next morning right after breakfast, Rebecca lifted her carpetbag onto the bed and opened the top dresser drawer.

"What are you doing, Mama?"

"Packing. We're going to town."

"Why?"

"Well, you get to meet all your cousins, and I want to visit my sister."

Michael jumped up on the bed and closed her bag. "No, don't want to go. Me and Gabe are staying here. We live here. You, too."

She stared at the boy. What had gotten into him? "But this isn't our home. We're going to have our own house in Texas. Would you like a pony?"

Jumping up and down on the feather mattress, he celebrated the idea. "Yes, I want my own pony, and Gabe needs one, too!"

"I promise when we get home to Texas...."

"But..." He plopped down, arms and legs sprawled. "My room is here."

"Well, you'll have a new room now at Aunt Mary and Uncle Jethro's home. You'll love them and your new cousins, too."

"No, I won't." His bottom lip pouted, his little button nose wrinkled up, then tears streamed down his cheeks.

She scooped up her big boy—so small and defenseless—and hugged him tight. "Michael, my darling, what's wrong?"

"Why you giving us away, Mama? Don't you love us no more? I don't want to be Aunt Mary's boy."

"Oh, baby, no! You and Gabriel are mine! Forever and ever. I'll never give you to anyone. We're only going to stay there together for a while until Aunt Bonnie and Uncle Jasper get married."

"What's a cousin?"

She giggled and tickled him. "Other little boys and girls who are a part of your family. Cousins are the children of my brothers and

sisters. After we have a long visit, then you and Gabe and I will travel back to Texas.”

“Texkus?”

“That’s a very big, beautiful state where our home is.” She held him tight until he wiggled free, then eased him down.

“And my pony?” He popped out of her lap, stepped back, and stared. Is Texkus where he is, too?”

“Absolutely! We’ll buy you the most handsome, gentle pony in all of the Lone Star State! And you can pick out one for Gabe, too. Because you’re right. He’ll need his own.”

“You promise? Can we have a puppy, too? We could share him.”

“Yes, sir. The ponies are a promise indeed. But you’ll have to feed them and brush their coats. We’ll see about a puppy.” How could she speak of canines and not remember Old Blue? “I got my first dog when I was nine.”

“What was his name?”

“Blue Dog, and he was a wonderful friend. The best pet in the whole wide world.”

“Wow. Can him be my dog now?”

“No, he got very old and passed, but your grandfather—my daddy—has one of his grandpups now named Newer Blue, but they call him Indigo. Maybe we could find one of his babies.” She smiled at her son.

“Promise?”

“Yes, sir.” She stuck out her hand. “Want to shake on it, Michael?”

He nodded and extended both little mitts. “I’ll shake for Gabe. Him a baby.”

Taking both his chubby little hands, she waggled them up and down. What she really wanted to do more than anything was scoop him up and smother him with kisses. But being a boy, he’d suddenly got way too serious for her to go all mushy on him.

What had given him the idea she would ever give him away?

The ride to town proved interesting. Michael took it upon himself to sit between her and Marcus. In the past, she’d seen flashes of jealousy from both, but thought the man had befriended her oldest son.

Would she ever understand the male mind? It was cute that the boy wanted her to himself. She liked that.

Marcus would just have to...oops...caught that thought before it bloomed. She needed to stop thinking of him as though he would be a part of her and the boys’ lives. Then again, things could change...he could get saved.

Daddy always said, nothing was too hard for God. She studied his profile...so handsome. Her hand went to her chest. Did her heart flutter? Was that a flutter?

Oh please, Lord, have mercy on me.

Unlike at Mercy House, she moved both boys into her room. Michael loved the idea. He also loved his cousins, especially Boaz. Seems the ten-year-old with three big sisters always wanted a little brother.

Now that she had her sons all signed, sealed, and delivered, what more could her heart want? Well, only three doors down the hall... except Marcus...his classification fell into the forbidden fruit category.

If only God would save his soul. And of course, He would, wanted to. He desired that none should perish. But...a man must believe, confess, and repent. Marcus would have to call on the name of the Lord.

Draw him, Father.

The morning of the third day at her sister's, Rebecca stealthily rose, tucked Michael in tighter, then eased on downstairs. She'd hoped to find Marcus up, but only her brother-in-law sat the kitchen table.

The oriental cook worked on breakfast.

She grabbed a cup then slid in across from him. "Good morning. Is Mary Rachel awake yet?"

"She is. Should be down shortly." He tilted his head a bit sideways. "Was that our boy I heard before the first cock crow?"

"Afraid so. He had another bad dream. I finally got him back to sleep about an hour ago, bless the little guy's heart."

He inhaled deeply then nodded. "Have any idea what's bothering him?"

"Not really. You know his real mother ran off and his grandmother was raising him and Gabriel before she died."

"Yes, I'd heard that. Let me know if he tells you anything specific."

"Of course. I will."

"I pray for all our babies, but I'll double my efforts on his behalf, for both your sakes."

"Thank you." She smiled even though she didn't much feel like it. The days ticked by. Bonnie and Jasper would be married in two weeks, then what? Could she really break her and Marcus' hearts? "How's the portrait coming? He refuses any previews."

"Same here. He showed us the initial sketch that we all loved but says we can see it when it's finished."

"Artist."

Jethro smiled. "Exactly."

"Exactly what?" The feminine voice came from behind, Rebecca turned. "Morning, Sister. We were talking about Marcus not wanting anyone to see his work in progress."

The conversation shifted quickly from the painting to Bonnie's

wedding. Plans were falling into place. Sometime during that most invigorating discussion, her brother-in-law vanished to do whatever it was he did.

Then the children needed attention. Such the life. She loved it. If only Mister Ford would surrender his heart, he could fill hers to overflowing.

Even if not though, she had her boys and the brightest of futures.



Michael pulled the chain, watched the water swirl around the bowl, then put the seat down. Mama got real picky about that, so he made sure. He'd teach Gabe when he could quit wearing diapers.

Sure was glad that he didn't do the stinky in his pants. Soon as his little brother could stand up good, he'd put a stop to that nastiness and learn him to whizz.

He liked that word. Only took Miss Gwen...uh, or Auntie...one time to let him know what not to call it. Big Mama did though. And so did Boaz, too. But he said not to say it in front of the grownups on counting they didn't like it.

Sure liked his big cousin.

The room smelled like his baby brother's powder when he marched back in. "Gabe finished yet? Can you read now?"

"Almost. What book do you want?"

"The pirate one. Me like Red Rooster."

"Get it down, and you can look at the drawings while you're waiting." She pointed to the books lined up in the shelves. "I don't know why I bother asking."

"Me neither, Mama."

"I, Michael. Say I, not me."

"I not me." A puzzled expression washed over his cherub face. "Then who am I, Mama?"

She laughed out loud that time, and he grinned. He loved it whenever she did that. Mama was so much fun. If only....

"What's wrong, sugar?"

"Nuffin." He lifted one corner of his mouth as though thinking hard on something.

"Well, just now, you were smiling. Then your face got real sad all of the sudden. Did something happen?"

"No, ma'am."

"Were you thinking of anything that made you sad?"

He scrunched his shoulders extra high then left them there, stretching his lips into the biggest smile he could make.

She couldn't ever know that Big Mama wouldn't stay dead.



Time! Michael scrunched one eye shut just like a swashbuckle guy and nodded toward his brother. “Gabe’s done. Him’s sleeping. Will you read now?”

“Let me lay him down, so you can sit in my lap.” She talked real soft, but brother never woke up if you just said stuff regular.

The grand pirate had the best stories. Michael loved going on the boat with him when it stormed and the way the one-eyed gentleman did the nicest things for the pretty women. One day he’d like to be a good pirate himself.

Mama kept reading.

Hard as he fought, he couldn’t keep his eyes from closing. He’d just rest them a minute and listen.

Then there she was.

His old mama. Sweeter than honey ’til the first man came. She carried his baby brother to his pallet in the water closet, frowned until Michael sat beside him. Then she whispered real nice. “Keep him quiet, good boy.”

He nodded.

She closed the door.

Darkness engulfed him, smothered him, so he couldn’t breathe. Gabe didn’t care, not as long as he had his thumb to suck on, but Michael hated the night.

Hated that Little Mama ran off, and how Big Mama made him sit in the dark all night long, watching his brother. He especially hated the men. Them was mean and bad, and sometimes they hurt Big Mama.

She screamed.

He hated it all.

The door flew open.

Uncle Jethro knelt down and picked up Gabe first, then held his other arm out. "Come with me, Son. You don't live here anymore."

He ran into the embrace then buried his face in the man's shoulder.

"Can you shut your eyes really tight?"

"Yeah." He squinted them, but couldn't help but peek when Uncle walked by Big Mama's bed.

But it was all made up.

And she wasn't there.

No long knife came out of her chest.

Then somehow, he cuddled next to his real Mama. Gabe slept in his baby bed on the other side of her. Uncle Jethro tucked the covers in tight. Michael snuggled in closer to her warmth.

His insides were so happy there. He drifted along on a cloud then landed with a thud on a three mast sailing ship.

One just like Red Rooster's!

Touching his patched eye, he scuffed the deck with the soles of his tall pirate boots. He loved those. The wind freshened out of the south. He liked freshened wind.

That means it was new, not old. Mama told him. A good breeze billowed the ship's sails.

The pirate's crew hustled about, unfurling more canvas, working hard to catch all the wind that they could and make that boat go really fast.

Sailing the Seven Seas with the Gentleman Pirate...oh, what fun!



Weight on her chest pulled Rebecca awake. She lifted one lid enough to see Michael's smiling face.

"Good morning, Mama."

"Good morning to you, Son." She touched both of his sides and wiggled her fingers until he scooted away giggling.

He ended up on the bed's edge, sitting cross-legged with a puffed out chest. "Me beed a swashbuckler last night with Red Rooster and his mates!"

The three-times-deeper-than-normal tone of his voice tickled her, but she forced a straight face. She rolled onto her side. "You were?"

"Yep, right after...." He looked toward the window then right back and smiled real big. "Hey, I didn't wet the bed."

"She made a show of patting the sheets all around. "You sure didn't! That's wonderful, sweet boy! I'm so proud of you."

Nodding so fast that he blurred his smile, he reveled in her praise. "Need some girl time, Mama?"

She wanted to say no and quiz him as to what he was going to say following 'right after' but instead flipped the back of her hand toward the door.

"You are so thoughtful, my precious one. Yes, sir, please. If you could give me a few minutes, I'll meet you downstairs."

"Yes, ma'am."

Her internal debate still raged once she reached the kitchen. Michael sat Jethro's lap sipping something out of a mug. Had the man given her boy coffee? Strange that he chummed up to his uncle when he acted so reserved with Marcus.

It'd be understandable if it had been Boaz or one of the little girls, but she'd never seen him interact with her brother-in-law before.

Michael held up his mug. "Fresh queeze, want some?"

"Ah, orange juice. Thank you, but not just yet. I'm a coffee-first kind of lady."

The cook handed her a steaming cup, and Rebecca slid in across from Jethro. The man kissed the top of Michael's head then grinned. "Sleep well?"

"Yes, sir, straight through." She lowered her gaze. "Did you tell Uncle Jethro about your dream?"

"No." He set his drink down, turned around, and launched into a detailed yarn of sailing the high seas with the Red Rooster himself. Halfway through the telling, Michael slipped down and pantomimed a sword fight. She loved it.

But better yet, loved that the boy dreamed of fun adventures rather than the monsters that had plagued him before.

After breakfast, she found herself alone with just Mary Rachel and Jethro, apparently by design. In the few days she'd been visiting, she'd never known the cook to be anywhere else but the kitchen.

"Yesterday after we talked, I made a few inquiries." Her sister knew everyone in town, and of course they all loved her. "It seems Michael witnessed his grandmother's murder."

Rebecca's heart jumped to her throat. "What?" Sharp pain stabbed it. "Mercy! Poor baby! No wonder he has nightmares. Have they caught her killer?"

"Not yet. Seems the lady had numerous gentleman callers—all strangers."

"Michael saw it all?"

"I located the deputy who found him and Gabriel." Jethro spoke in low tones. "He said the brothers were in the water closet on a filthy blanket. Claimed he told Michael not to look—had to walk through the grandmother's bedroom—but our little man must have."

“Oh, my precious!”

“The officer said the boy screamed and kicked on the way out. She’d been murdered in her bed. A lot of blood.”

Rebecca’s hands flew to her mouth. What a horrible thing to see. She shook her head then looked around, no little ears listening. “Has he ever sat in your lap like that before?”

“No, ma’am. Came down all bright eyed, telling me you needed girl time.”

Her sister grinned. “He snickered like it was a big secret, then walked straight over to Jethro and stood right next to him.”

“So I picked him up.” He lifted his shoulders as though perplexed. “Cookie got him some juice right before you came.”

“Did he say anything?”

Jethro leaned forward. “I got a thank you and a big hug, but I’m not sure what I did.”

“Bless the Lord for whatever it was. Please, keep us in your prayers. Both of you. I’m praying that last night will be the first of many such good nights.”

“Of course, always.” Her sister stood, took Rebecca’s cup, then strolled to the stove.

“Good. You’re all still here.” Marcus stood in the doorway grinning. “It isn’t finished, but anyone want a peek?”



Ford’s love’s ‘yes’ beat Mary Rachel’s by half a hound’s tooth, if that. She spun, sloshing coffee from two full cups before handing Rebecca one. “Lead on, Mister Artist! I’m giddy and can hardly wait!”

It tickled him even more how fast the ladies hurried him to his makeshift studio. Jethro, on the other hand, lagged behind, like maybe he regretted offering so much coin for a little paint daubing.

“Oh, Marcus! You’ve captured them all! Every one!” Rebecca stared while her sister’s mouth gaped, then her hand covered her smile.

“It’s...it’s...awesome. So much more than I ever expected.” She turned to her husband. “Honey, we should pay him double. Really. This is so fabulous. Don’t you agree?”

On and on the sisters gushed, and he loved the ladies’ reactions, but the man’s face didn’t betray his thoughts, and he ignored his wife’s question.

Was Jethro Risen a poker player?

The man faced him. “I’m beyond impressed, Marcus. The Lord has given you a rare gift.”

“Thank you, sir. And your approval is more than enough extra.” He grinned. “No need for doubling my pay.” His smile broadened when offered to his love and her sister. “Thank you two, also, for the kind words.” He looked back to the man. “I do have a boon to ask.”

One of the man’s brows hiked a stroke’s worth. “Anything within my purview.”

“I’ve been thinking about the background. Perhaps—if you’re agreeable—the orphanage on the left, flowing into the harbor with the Miners’ Bank and Lone Star Mercantile on the right.”

Mary Rachel spoke before her husband could answer. “Oh, yes! That would be wonderful!” She looked at her sister then Jethro.

Her eyes brimmed with tears. “That pretty much...” Her voice choked, and she cleared her throat. “It would cover our lives together completely.”

Jethro nodded then faced Ford. “What’s the favor?”

“I’ve made some sketches of Mercy House, but I would like the afternoon off to get a better look at the harbor. Decide on the best angles on the bank and store.”

“Done. Need the buggy? Or I could hire a carriage and have it here within the hour.”

“I would like that. And if you both would consider Michael an adequate chaperone, Rebecca would need someone to watch little Gabe.” He grinned at his beloved. “If you’re of a mind to help.”



Silly man! Of course she wanted to help! Rebecca glanced at her sister who nodded.

“We can take Gabe to the store with us. Be like old times, having a baby there for the customers to make over. He’ll love the attention, and I can guarantee the girls will love having him. Perhaps I can suspend their lesson for the day.”

“Perfect. Thank you so very much. Did anyone see which way Michael and Boaz went?”

While Rebecca dressed herself and Michael for the outing, she rehearsed what she would say to Marcus if he mentioned marriage.

In any of the time she’d found herself alone with him, he hadn’t proposed. He only talked about the painting, her sons, or the weather, or... Why wasn’t he asking?

Could she really break both their hearts? She must, of course. Scripture clearly exhorted Christians not to unequally yoke themselves. A believer should not marry a nonbeliever.

What if Daddy hadn’t got saved?

Her mother would never have married him. That was the simple truth. No matter how bad it hurt her...or him...or Rebecca.

How different would her life have been without Henry Buckmeyer in it?

But her mother remained true to her vow and what she always said was God's will. Some called her stubborn, but her commitment to her word...her unbroken vow...had inspired Rebecca to stay strong.

No matter Michael had taken to the man or how good a father that the man would obviously be.

Still, it didn't hurt her feelings a bit when Marcus bribed the driver to let the boy take the team's reins.

The most wonderful of days unfolded, and she found her heart at peace even though nothing had been settled by its end. He'd seen everything he needed to and studied what seemed to be every angle.

During all that, one thing surfaced quite clearly. When she finally did have to tell him no—he would assuredly ask her—her son's heart would be broken, too.

Poor little precious. And she'd know just how he would feel.

Might she discover an exception to the scriptures about nonbelieving spouses? Seemed to her the Holy Book mentioned something about them.

Once before when she'd gone to reading her Bible during a sermon that failed to hold her attention, she'd spotted it and wondered then if her mother had ever run across it. She led Marcus toward her room then held the door.

He walked on in with a napping Michael draped over his shoulder.

She nodded toward her bed and whispered, pantomiming. "Put pillows on both sides of him."

He complied then joined her at the door. "Thank you, my sweet. It was a wonderful day. Best I've had since..." One of his shoulders lifted. "Jefferson, I suppose. Except this one's ending better." He grinned. "Could be even more better." Both eyebrows hiked a smidgen.

Laughing, she pushed gently against his chest. "There's no such thing as more better!" Oh, how she wanted exactly what he offered, but... She filled her lungs. "Don't you have a painting to see to?"

"Yes, ma'am." He backed up a step. "Of course. Thank you again."

"My pleasure. See you at supper."

He backed away another step. His eyes focused on hers, pleading for her surrender, to say yes. Let the world take the hindmost. She returned his gaze, then as her heart boomed yes, yes, yes, she made herself glance away. "You best go on now."

"Yes, ma'am. You're plainly right. I best go on."

His footfalls told her he retreated. She looked up. Francy—with

Gabe straddled on her hip—passed Marcus in the hall. The man nodded, but the young lady's eyes lingered a bit too long on his face. Her full lips stretched wide, corners upturned, exposing a dazzling smile. Too long for Rebecca's taste, then she chided herself for being a jealous idiot and held her hands out.

"Was he good for you?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am. Gooder than gold." She kissed his cheek then passed him over. "I've been thinking, Auntie. Mama mentioned you said something about finding a travel companion to help with the boys on your trip back to Texas."

"Indeed I am. You know someone?"

"How about me?"

"Well, you'd certainly do fine, but are you sure? Even if you turned around and came right back, you'd be gone two months at least."

"I was thinking I might just stay a while." She grinned. "If that was possible, I mean."

"Of course, you'd be welcomed to stay as long as you wanted. I'd love having your company and help. Have you spoken with your mother? I'll pay all your expenses and..."

Mary Rachel's adopted daughter tilted her chin playfully. "You see, Bonnie was telling me about all of the Brigg's brothers...and cousins. Do you know them?"

"Very well, as a matter of fact. We've been going to church with the whole clan forever. They're fine folk, lots of good men and boys."

"Would you say they're all cut from the same cloth as Clay and Jasper?"

The grin refused to be denied, though she tried. "I would. There's not one bad word that would fit any of them."

The young lady matched her mirth with an even bigger smile. "Beyond expenses, an introduction would be pay aplenty."



Francy floated down the stairs. Texas! She'd wanted to go back almost since the day she'd left. Oh, she liked California alright, but that slower pace, living closer to the land, and all the men. Not a grubby miner in the lot!

Houston and Bart would be grown, or almost. From what everyone said, the war aged a man. Shame they were both younger than her, either would be a catch. But if she could find herself a Briggs brother or cousin, well then...just maybe.... She might end up staying in the Lone Star State.

If she did, could tilt the scales in favor of her parents selling out and making the move back to Mama's roots liked they'd talk about some.

The open door to the parlor caught her eye. Inside the makeshift studio, Mister Ford stood before the big canvas that rested on three wooden poles. Called it an easel. He held a piece of paper in his hand and looked from the drawing to the painting.

Dare she? Why not? She tapped on the door.

"Mama was bragging on you. Said you let her and daddy have a peek."

"Yes, ma'am. I did."

"May I have a look, too? Seeing how it was my turn to open early, and I missed it this morning, seems only fair."

"Whoever told you that life was fair?" The man stared at her for a minute then stepped away from the painting. "Sure, but leave the door open."

Hmm. Why would he want the door open? Oh, well, she complied.

Backing away from his work, the artist wore a bemused expression. Was her being in there bothering the man?

As she neared, her eyes came to rest on the family portrait, and her breath caught. Wow! He painted that? The colors exploded like

dynamite at the mine and splattered her heart.

The expressions he'd captured...all their likenesses! But even more, her family...Mother, Daddy, her sisters and brother...their personalities shone there on the canvas.

She loved it.

Exactly like it was them. How was that possible?

She tore her eyes away and faced the man. "How...? Uh...it's so awesome. I couldn't have imagined. They all said nice things about the murals at the orphanage, but this is..." She looked back, grinned, and faced him again. "Thank you."

With sort of a snuffed giggle, he smiled back. "You're welcome, of course; but what is it exactly that you're thanking me for?"

A smirk threatened, followed by a desire to hit him, like she used to do when her brother did something nice, but she didn't want to admit it. "If you don't know, then I take back my thank you."

"Oh?" The curtains ruffled with the breeze fresh off the water. He glanced at the window. "You talking about the two inches I gave you?"

"More like three, but yes, sir. So you've earned the thank you back."

"You're welcome."

"Did you hear I'm going to Texas with you and Auntie?"

"You are? What brought that about?" He looked into her eyes.

Right back into his, she gazed, but the longer she did, it got hard to keep her wits. So blue, and the man so handsome. How crazy... Dizzy? Really? Had he asked a question? Yes! She was certain.

What was it though? What had he said? "Uh, excuse me, what?"

"Why Texas?"

Oh, yes. She remembered. Did he not like the idea of her going with them? Why wouldn't he? Strange happenings inside her chest puzzled her. A sweet sorrow, but that couldn't be. Why had she even tinkered with the idea?

"You...uh...are opposed to it?" She studied the floor, unwilling to be captured again by the depth of those pools. Especially if he didn't want her to go.

"No, only curious."

She looked up, he still stared at her. "Well, Auntie asked us to be on the lookout for a nanny to help with the boys. When I thought about it... I mean, Bonnie and Jasper will be along, too, but being newlyweds and all... I've wanted to go back to Texas."

"I remember something about that being said—probably from your Uncle Wallace. That man loved talking about his family. You went back with Mary Rachel and Jethro when you were a child, right?"

“Yes, sir. Ten.” And now she had a whole new reason. Should she tell him about wanting to meet the Briggs clan? Not like he wasn’t already spoken for, wasn’t he? But, Mama claimed Aunt Rebecca would not even consider marriage—him being a heathen.

“How old are you?” Oh, my! Why had she blurted that out?

“Thirty-nine.”

At least he acted nonchalant regarding her question. “Oh.” Wasn’t Aunt Rebecca in her forties? Could that be the real reason she wasn’t saying yes? If he had even asked....

No one had said a word about a proposal. If he had, wouldn’t they have been talking about it? Of course they would.

Maybe she didn’t want to marry a younger man.

Francy wouldn’t hold his age or him not being a Christian against him. A month of Sundays would take care of the latter. How could anyone be around Daddy or Brother Paul and not become a believer?

Might as well find out for her own self where his heart lay.

“Mama says Auntie is lovesick over you.”

He chuckled. “She does?”

“Yes, sir, and that you’ve got it even worse. She says that she’s never seen any two people more in love.”

“I have to agree.” A pang stabbed her like a stake in her heart.

He nodded toward the doorway. “Best let me have some time before supper if I’m going to finish this before we leave for Texas.”

She glanced at the painting then couldn’t resist and punched his shoulder, but not that hard. Not like she use to slug her brother.

“Ouch.” He rubbed his arm a bit too vigorously. “What was that for?”

She backed away. “Oh... I thought I heard you call me Shorty.”

“Not me. I know better.” He winked.

Her heart did a somersault. She practically curtsied. “Guess I was wrong.”

For sure, an uncle was the last thing she wanted him to be!



The days of preparation flew by in a joyous blur tinged with a horror Rebecca had only known once before. But that first time hadn’t lasted too long, even if her heart had stopped when Mama told Daddy that she couldn’t marry him.

Those terrible few seconds that quickly turned magnificent once he revealed his salvation.

But the nag that Rebecca must give Marcus an answer before boarding the ship home...it fueled such a fierce dread. Best she could,

she refused to dwell on it, yet there it lurked.

Always at the edge of everything she did...all her festive busyness with Mary Rachel helping Bonnie prepare for her wedding.

She'd found the scripture she remembered, but no matter how many ways she studied the verses, it only worked for a new believer who was already married to a heathen before conversion.

And the worst part of it remained that the more time she spent in his company, the more she loved the man.

Leaving him behind would be devastating, no matter how hard she tried to deny her love to her own self. The lie wouldn't protect her heart.

Then to top it all, she'd caught Francy making eyes at Mister Ford and him smiling back at her, almost as though he encouraged her brazen behavior. Would that be her life? All the young ladies swooning over her man?

Well...except he didn't belong to her and would never be hers if God didn't move.

Why did trusting Him have to be so hard?

He'd given her two wonderful sons. Why—if it wasn't His will in the first place—had He allowed Marcus Ford to board that stage? She'd never loved anyone the way.... She hated it all the way to Texas and back.

Even Baby Gabe had taken to the big flirt. He squirmed and reached for the man whenever Marcus talked to the little guy.

How could she leave him?

How could she not?

Late on the last night before the big day, after the boys slumbered in that sweet peace only the young know, she knelt beside her bed. For the longest, she praised and worshiped her heavenly Father, then finally gave voice to her heart.

“Oh, God, have pity on me. I love him so, and nothing is too hard for You. Yet I know it has to be his free will... Give me the strength, Lord...to break both our hearts.”



An elbow in her rib woke Francy way too early. Though she tried every which way to scooch her sisters around, she could not garner ample room to even try to go back to sleep. The grandfather clock in the hall struck the half hour.

Like a startled cat, she arched her back and carefully crawled over Becca on hands and feet then slipped out of bed.

Why had she agreed to let her little sisters sleep with her anyway?

Not like she'd never see them again. Texas wasn't that far. Unless, of course, she found the right man.

Tiptoeing to the window, she pulled back the curtain. No hint yet of the sun, but enough moonlight illuminated the hands on her clock. Four thirty-two.

Might as well stay up. If she hurried, she could surprise her daddy with coffee. Wouldn't that be fun? Beating him to the kitchen her last day in San Francisco!

Wrapped in her housecoat, she found her house slippers under the edge of the bed then eased out, lit a lamp, and headed downstairs.

A light shone under the parlor door. Had Marcus left on the lamp? Surely not. She turned the handle and peeked in. The man sat a high-backed chair in the far corner. A brush in his hand rested on his leg. He appeared to be asleep.

Her heartbeat quickened. Would she ever have another chance?

As quietly as possible, she padded across the room and set her lamp on the table next to the one he'd left burning. She inched closer.

What was she thinking?

He smelled of oil paint and man sweat and even sound asleep, was no doubt the most handsome and desirable man she'd ever laid eyes on.



His love pressed her lips against his. Ford wrapped his arms around her then pulled her close. For the longest, he held the lady wallowing in the feel of her next to him then kissed her. She pulled away.

What? Why? He opened his eyes. Instead of his love, Francy grinned.

"Good morning."

Pushing her from his lap, he stood. "Young woman! What are you doing?"

"I...uh... It looked like you were dead or something." She shrugged. "I was only trying to check to be sure you... Then you grabbed me and..." She grinned. "I...uh... Well...I'm not upset or anything...uh...if..."

"I'm so sorry, Francy. I thought you were Rebecca. I must have been dreaming. Please forgive me."

Her lips turned down, and her eyes flashed. "Fine then." She backed away a step. "But you should know, when Auntie breaks your heart, you are most welcomed to come crying to me." She stared for a moment, right into his eyes, then turned and floated out of the room.

Had he heard her correctly? Why would she say that? Did the girl know something he didn't?

Rebecca loved him. That fact needed no confirmation in his eyes. She would never break his heart.

Without a doubt the diminutive spit-fire who he hoped would be his niece was not the woman he wanted or needed. The young lady might make the right man a good wife, but he definitely was not that man. He retreated to the wingback.

Apparently, he'd fallen asleep while studying the painting.

Where was his brush? He searched the floor until he located it, then turned his attention back to his composition. Something was amiss, but he hadn't figured it out last night.

The wedding was that afternoon with plans for everyone going to board that very night and steam out first thing in the morning.

He'd give it another hour. If unable to place his finger on the problem...what bothered him, so that he could fix it, then he'd go ahead and put his name on it and call it finished.

Half an hour past his self-imposed deadline, it dawned on him. One side of the barn's roof at the orphanage tilted wrong by at least three degrees.

With a few strokes, he fixed it then returned to the wingback and melted into the chair's plushness. The completeness of his task brought a heaviness to eyes.

Drifting off, he caught a glimpse of his love playing with Michael and Gabriel in a big meadow. He reached for her hand, but a darkness swallowed him.

"Hey, Mister Marc."

Ford pried one eye open. The four-year-old stood at his knee.

"Hey, yourself Mister Mick."

"I found you. Mama said you was lost, but here you are. Want me to tell her that I found you?"

"Why'd your mother think I was lost?"

With twisted lips, he hiked his little shoulders to earlobe level and shook his head. "I don't know. Just heard her and Auntie and Nannie talking last night. Me and Gabe was making buildings with blocks." The boy grinned. "Him likes to chew on them. I was making a whole fort. Want to pay blocks with me? You can make the walls."

"Not right now, little buddy. What else did your mother say about me?" Shameless, pumping a four-year-old for information, but something was afoot. He needed to know exactly what he faced.

"Oh, talk, talk talk. That's what them ladies do, all the time. But mama started whispering. I squinted me good eye, just like Red Rooster, so I could hear better. Mama told Nannie she couldn't marry you on account of you was lost."

“She did?”

“Uh huh. Does that mean you can’t be my daddy? I thought you was. Now since I found you, maybe you still can be.”

“I thought so, too, Mick. Sure hope so.”

“Me, too.” The boy grinned, glanced at the painting then ran out of the room like nothing was amiss.



Ford took one last look at the portrait then gathered his brushes and other supplies. Once cleaned and stored, he bounded up the stairs to get dressed and pack the supplies in his grip.

Double checking his best party rags in the full length mirror on his way out the door, he headed back down, both hands full. He deposited his bags alongside the others by the side door.

Rebecca had more than doubled her lot.

If he got half a chance, he hoped to separate his love from the gaggle of sisters. Had he ever heard or known of more opulent preparations for the imminent nuptials?

Not likely. His own had been a simple affair. 'Twas the wedding night bed interested him most. He closed his eyes. Oh, Julia.

For a few beats of his heart, she hung just on the edge of the mental image that flashed before his inner eye. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't bring her into focus.

For perhaps the thousandth time, he regretted burning his paintings of her. If only...but that notion drifted away without further consideration.

His heart belonged to Rebecca...the living lady so different from the first who'd passed too young. He'd fulfilled his vow to his wife, kept himself only unto her and loved her until death parted her from him.

Loving again hadn't been a goal or even a desire, truth be known. Meeting his friend's wife...speaking with her...his heart...suddenly

filled to overflow with desire for her.

Feasting his eyes on the beautiful Widow Rusk, his breath caught. Best be to seeing about such nonsense that she might be thinking for one minute of not marrying him.

Obvious to anyone who paid any attention, she deserved a wealthy and wise man—one who would outclass Ford by leaps and bounds.

No one could ever love her more. Of that he was certain.

And somehow, some way, it appeared the lady loved him as much as he did her. So what was all that leaving without getting married about? And why couldn't it have been a double ceremony?

All that trouble for one couple seemed downright silly. Then again, women usually were.

Through the horde of femininity, he followed her into the big dining hall, the one the Risens only used on Sundays, and apparently, for fancy weddings and such.

Though she gave him a smile and wave from across the table, she didn't appear to be free for a word. The room looked grand, but apparently, the ladies wanted it to be stupendous or....

Was there a word beyond that? Ford wasn't sure.

"Hey, anyone seen Jethro?"

Mary Rachel pointed toward her husband's study, but couldn't be bothered to even look at him. He grinned at the young lady and turned. He'd remind her of her rudeness once she became his sister-in-law.

Just as the man's wife predicted. Ford found her husband in his lair, hiding behind a giant mahogany desk, sitting an oversized leather chair. He grinned sheepishly as if a bit relieved that it wasn't his wife or one of her sisters who'd come to press him back into service.

"Marcus! Good morning."

"Yes, it is. I finished the painting if you care to inspect my work...." That didn't sound right. How could he ask a man for overpayment?

Especially when he'd been living in Risen's house and eating his food with nary a cent passed from his hand to the man's. Living on his future brother-in-law's charity without a care in the world.

"No need." The man pulled out the middle drawer, retrieved a fat envelope, and slid it across the desk top. "Thank you. The last time I got a look, it was even better than I hoped. If you're happy, I'm delighted."

Ford took the envelope then stuck it in his pocket instead of opening it and giving back half. Wasn't his idea; he hadn't set the price. "You did take out for my steamer ticket like I asked?"

The man nodded. "Yes, sir. First class all the way to New

Orleans.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Jethro looked over Ford’s shoulder then back. “Amos is here to take all the luggage to the dock. Is yours with the rest?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” The man stood and extended his hand. “If I don’t have a chance before everyone leaves tonight, I’ve enjoyed getting to know you.”

Ford stood and offered his own. Once his fingers closed around Risen’s hand, a strange tingling ran up his arm to his heart.

“Bless you, Marcus. May the Lord cause His face to shine on you, and may He give you the desires of your heart.”

A mist wet his eyes, but he blinked them back. He managed a weak ‘thank you.’ A part of him wanted to stay. Ask what just happened. The better part wanted nothing to do with Jethro Risen’s religion.

A nod and a smile bid his adieu. Ford backed away a few steps then without another word, turned and hurried past the young man who stood just inside the door.

The tingling faded, but the man’s words echoed through his soul. Especially the part about the desires of his heart. Wouldn’t that be something? A loving Deity Who gave you whatever you wanted?

If only that was true. Life had proved otherwise. If there was a God, he sure paid poor attention.

Last he’d read, the papers claimed over half a million men and boys had died in the war. Too many to count returned home missing limbs.

Idiot Wallace could have come back to her without a leg and lived out his years with the love of his life.

Why hadn’t he? Ford would suffer anything for that end. He sighed, thinking again of the one cavalry charge he’d played a part.

And worse, with the fighting finally over, the Yankees ran roughshod over the South.

Utter nonsense, all of it. Slavery would have died a natural death without the war, and so many mothers and wives wouldn’t carry broken hearts...like his Rebecca. He loved her true, and if her kiss proved any indication, she loved him, too.

That was that. Once back in Texas, he’d marry her. Once he had the General’s blessing.

During a flurry of activity that he mostly avoided, all the last minute details came together in what had to be the best wedding ever. At least that’s what everyone kept saying during the reception.

To his way of thinking, being beside Rebecca during the whole

shindig had to be the best part...the length of her shoulder against his.

Then it seemed once she and the boys joined him in the hired carriage heading to the pier, things changed. Her smile had vanished...replaced with a forlorn expression that troubled him.

Someone had even thought to decorate the dock with bunting and extra lamps. A band played. How much money had Risen spent?

After all the glad handing and tearful goodbyes, the newlyweds boarded. Rebecca handed the boys off to Francy who carried Gabe and led Mick up the ramp.

He held her in his arms, ready to dance the entire night away to keep her there.

Mary Rachel and Jethro left first, then Gwen and Clay took their leave to get back to Mercy House. Both sisters coaxed his love away to hug them and say their teary goodbyes. He'd never understand the closeness between siblings.

Finally, just she and he remained, standing on the pier with the steamer at her back. What a portrait it would make, except he'd paint her the way she looked right before she kissed him.

She stepped in too close and looked up into his eyes. "Come, dear Marcus. Let's have a coffee in the dining room."

The moment passed along with the ethereal thrill of holding her all night. "Of course. Coffee sounds good."

Did she float up the ramp as he did on the waves of love washing over? A waiter brought two steaming cups of the dark brew, and she stared into his eyes, sipping hers. Something bothered her.

Was it leaving San Francisco and her sisters? She'd said time and again she couldn't wait to get the boys to Texas.

He blew into his cup, then slid some of the bitter hot coffee down his own throat. "What's wrong?"

"It's because..." She took his hands. "I've got to tell you something, Marcus."

He hated the tone of her voice—so sorrowful—and hated the doom in her eyes.

Tears welled forming a glistening ridge along her thick lashes. They overflowed, and their trails gleamed in the extra lamplight.

"What, sweetheart? What's wrong?"

She squeezed hard. Her nails dug into his palms. "I...uh...Oh Lord, help me. Marcus, I love you, I truly do, but I can't marry you. I cannot."

"Of course you can. We love each other. You just professed it."

What was she doing?

Tears streamed, but she didn't wipe them, only stared at him. Her bottom lip quivered then stiffened, and she spoke in a raspy whisper.

"You are not a Christian, and I cannot marry you. No matter how

much I love you.”

He released her hands, stood and backed up a step. “You can’t mean that.”

“I’m sorry, but I do. It’d be terrible for both of us. The Bible says....”

“Stop.” He held his hand up. “Don’t quote scripture to me. I don’t care what a bunch of lunatics wrote hundreds of years ago. It has no bearing on us here and now.”

“But it does, Marcus. It’s God’s Word.”

He backed up another step. His own tears threatened, but he’d have none of that. She didn’t love him after all.

“It’s late. Let’s call it a night. We can talk about this later.”

“No. There’ll be no later. If you refuse to marry me, then....” A chill washed over his heart. No way could he spend a month being on board with her, knowing she didn’t love him.

“Come on, Marcus.” She stepped toward him and extended her hand. “Don’t be obstinate. You’ve paid for the ticket. Your bags are in your room.”

He shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. Nothing matters. If I have to believe there’s a God up there somewhere that’s watching over me before we can be married then....” He backed away. “I love you, Rebecca Rusk. I’ll always love you, but...” He shrugged. “Apparently, that’s not enough. Goodbye, Rebecca. Tell Michael...tell him I’m sorry that I can’t be his daddy.”

Her chest heaved. A sob escaped. Her eyes spoke of love and longing.

Then her beautiful face turned to flint. She filled her lungs then turned and ran up the stairs without looking back. He held his ground until she reached the second floor landing.

She never turned, just vanished like that was that.

He spun around, wiped his cheeks, and marched away.

Got himself off the ship as fast as possible.



Rebecca held her tears until she reached her suite. The door to Francy’s and the boys’ room was closed. She threw herself across her bed and sobbed. She’d ruined her life. Why had she told him before the ship sailed?

Nothing went as planned. He took it all wrong. Instead of having a whole month to convince him he needed the Lord’s mercy and forgiveness, she’d lost him.

Worse, he was doomed for all of eternity.

The tears increased. She buried her face in her pillows. What an idiot! The man she'd been waiting for the whole of her life had finally shown up...and she ran him off.

A light tap pulled her up and off the bed. She wiped her cheeks. Had he changed his mind and boarded after all? She opened her door. Francy stood there holding a steaming mug.

"What did he say?"

How did she know? Had Mary Rachel been talking out of school?

Accepting the girl's offering, Rebecca took a sip. Who told her she liked hot toddies? "Not much. Are the boys asleep?"

"Yes, ma'am. Right after we boarded. Michael fought it some, but with him missing his nap, he only lasted a page and a half. Mama said you were going to talk with Marcus about him not being saved. Is he open to the Lord at all?"

"No, I suppose not. I had what I was going to say all planned out, but..." She was a fool.

"He loves you. I know he does."

The young lady's words didn't offer much solace. Marcus Ford loved her, wanted her more than his next breath. She'd thought that fact would hold up under any scrutiny.

"Apparently not enough. He's still blaming God for his wife and baby girl dying."



"Oh, no." Francy nodded toward the settee then eased into the chair across from it. "How did that come to happen?"

Auntie shrugged then sat. "Yellow fever got them in...fifty-one or two, I'm not sure. Put him in a morose mood. He burned all of the pictures he had of her, stopped painting all together until..."

The older lady looked off then took a sip of her drink. Shame it only had a tiny bit of whiskey. Sure appeared the old girl needed a stiffer shot.

"Poor, Marcus! How old was the baby?"

Rebecca looked at her but her focus seemed to be elsewhere, completely understandable. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"Marcus's baby. Do you know how old she was?"

She nodded. "Six months. Died in his arms a few minutes after his wife passed."

"How horrible! Poor man! And you say he blames God?"

"Yes, I thought...oh mercy...I'm so stupid!" She shook her head, took a big pull off her drink, then stared into it.

"Want another?"

“Please.”

Francy got her aunt another toddy, but she refused a third, then excused herself without relaying much of exactly what had been said.

Hopefully, when the morning came, she could get the man alone long enough to hear his side. Hear if their relationship was really over.

Normally, Francy didn't truck with leftovers, but with Marcus Ford, she'd make an exception.



A glimmer of hope pulled Rebecca from her latest doze. What a horrible night. She threw on her housecoat and held the portal's curtain aside. The city showed signs of the new day.

The lamps still burned, casting long shadows of teams pulling wagons and longshoremen hurrying about.

Was Marcus among them?

Had he swallowed his pride and changed his mind about going with her?

Instead of brushing her wedding coiffure out, she fluffed and pinned it again then threw on a dress. Down the stairs to the galley, she procured a carafe of coffee then retreated to her room.

Before sunrise, they put out the gangplank one more time, and a few couples and two families boarded. As the sun rose higher, a flurry of last minute passengers crowded the dock.

Was Marcus amongst them?

She hurried out of her room and eased the boys' door open. Three lumps in the bed told her all she needed to know. Quietly closing it, she rushed to find the doorway to the third floor railing.

The few men who could have been him dashed her hopes each time she got a better look.

Why was he waiting for the last minute?

The horn's final blast that accompanied the crew pulling the gangplank aboard cut her heart.

He wasn't coming.

He didn't love her after all.

Not like she thought.

She waited until the big wheel began churning the bay's water white. A few inches, then feet, then the steamer left the dock of the bay, heading out to open waters. Home to Texas. She filled her lungs then turned her attention to those who did love her.

Her boys...they were her life now. Should have known better.

What a fool to believe Marcus Ford could be the love of her life.

No way under Heaven would Father God send a heathen to be her husband or her children's daddy. She may never meet the man created especially for her.

Or maybe she already had, and Wallace was as good as it got. She'd always considered him a best friend...and truly loved him, but with Marcus....

Well, she'd never experienced anything to compare.

Still....



Once the steamer turned away from the wharf, and his love went back inside, Ford stepped from the shadows.

She didn't love him after all. Not like he thought.

Stubborn woman. Putting her religion ahead of him. Wasn't like he objected to her going to church. Why should he care if she even took the boys?

He didn't.

Insisting that he believe in a fictitious loving God who watched over him was beyond the pale. Ludicrous. How could she ever think he would?

Especially after what happened.

He walked to the dock's edge. The side wheel bit into the bay, churning its gray-green waters, propelling the ship farther away by the minute. She was gone. Just like he'd told her last night. He'd always love her.

But... A mist blurred his vision, and he could imagine the steamer being an evil monster of the deep carrying off the one perfect woman.

What a fool to think she loved him.

A cloud shrouded his heart, but that time—unlike when he lost Julia and Michele, he had no grave to mourn over or decorate with flowers and little gifts for his Mimi girl. Why was this happening

again?

For so long, he'd refused to even think of love. Then Rebecca came into his life with the key to his heart.

Once she owned it though, she tore it to pieces. And what over? Not believing in a merciful creator. What nonsense. If a God existed up there, the entity sure wasn't watching over anyone.

Probably, the truth leaned toward what the Greeks thought, warring factions that delighted in tormenting their rival's favorites. But that didn't make sense either. And no religion he'd ever heard about did.

At the last glimpse of her steamer, he turned away from the sea. Of their own, his feet propelled him away from the dock. Hours later—or was it just minutes? He didn't know or care—he found himself in the lobby of a hotel.

Room and board for a week took a chunk of his cash, but what did it matter? Neither did the dollars paid extra for a third-story view of the ocean. Maybe God could prove to Marcus that He did indeed reside in heaven.

Perhaps He would cause the ship to turn back.

He pulled a chair to the open window and went to watching. "You out there, God? If You are, bring her back to me."



Francy patted the baby's back until she got his man-sized burp then increased her rocking by half again. Soon enough, Gabe's breathing slowed, and he snuggled in tighter. She gave him ten more slowed wobbles then eased him into his bed.

She soft-shoed into the next room. Michael practiced his numbers on his chalkboard, while the boy's mother read her Bible.

"Unless you need me to stay, thought I'd explore the ship some."

Rebecca shook her head. "No, you go ahead, honey."

"Need me to fetch anything for you?"

The boy looked up and grinned. "Big ol' bag of candy and a sharp sword to stick the alligators with."

She returned his mirth. "No, and no. Well...if I find a small wooden one, maybe."

Her aunt's eyebrow raised a fraction, but she made no other comment. She could tell getting to know Aunt Rebecca would be fun.

Watching the relationship between the little fellows and their new mama reminded her of when she and her adopted mama got to know each other. Who wouldn't love those adorable little boys?

One stroll around the whole third floor stretched her legs enough.

Though she didn't really expect to find Marcus, she'd hoped to run into him. After searching the two top floors—surely he wouldn't be in steerage, would he?—she headed back to the suite she shared with Auntie and the man-plants.

On the way by, she resisted knocking on his door. Being caught alone with him in his room...that was the last thing she needed.

Him kissing her back—too fresh—too exhilarating. Could she stand not comforting the man in his time of pain?

The four-year-old messed with her some that she didn't bring him sweets or a weapon of any kind. He ranted about having pirates to subdue, and no one seemed to care. Reading a story temporarily soothed his lust for high adventure.

For the noon meal, Rebecca insisted she wanted to stay in and asked Francy to take the boys to the dining hall and bring her back something light, if anything at all. Tickled her silly.

Surely she could have a word there with Marcus. But the man never showed his handsome face. Probably sulking in his room, too.

A simple word with him. That's all she needed. Not knowing his heart—how he thought of their kiss—pained her own.

Then God's gift to mothers—both boys taking their naps together—landed in her lap square and lovely like a cool breeze on a hot day. She closed the bedroom door then slipped into the chair next to her aunt.

Auntie marked her spot in the book she'd been reading. A tome Francy didn't recognize. "They sure went down easy."

"Yes, ma'am. I think it's the ship's motion."

"Perhaps." The older woman studied the spine of her book. "I need a favor."

"Of course. If I can, I will."

"Get the purser to escort you to steerage, locate the family who looks to be the neediest then give them Marcus's room."

The words pushed her back in her chair. "Why would I do that? Where's the Major going to bunk?"

"He's not on board."

"What? Why?"

"He ran off after we talked last night. I got up early and watched the gangplank until we sailed. When you and the boys went to dinner, I checked his room. He isn't there. Hasn't been there. Someone might as well benefit from it, don't you think?"

The news hit her hard. Not on board? Back in San Francisco? How could Rebecca be so nonchalant? She should care more, cry her eyes out or something.

"Yes...of course. I can do that. But how terrible that is, Auntie. You two love each other so much. He's willing to throw it all away?"

“Apparently, he hates God more than he loves me.”



The young lady's words belied what Rebecca saw in her eyes. Apparently Marcus not being on the voyage upset Francy more than she wanted to admit.

Wouldn't surprise her at all if the girl caught the first steamer back. She might even let her out of her commitment and send her back at Panama City.

A mental image of Francy flirting with Marcus put that notion away. She'd just as soon not know the person Ford ended up with.

Hopefully, he would find someone who didn't mind him being a heathen. She couldn't stand to think about him dooming his soul to hell. Tears threatened, but she blinked them away.

She'd made her choice, the right one, and he'd made his.

Bless him, Lord. Help him find You, find peace.

“Did he get his bags?”

The girl's question pulled Rebecca back to the moment. “I'm sorry. What did you ask?”

“Marcus. Did he get his bags?”

“No. They're still there, would you mind fetching them? The key is on my dresser, and...” Could she stand seeing his things?

Filling her lungs, she determined of course she could. He was the one who ran off when all he had to do was accept the Lord's gift of life, but.... “Put them in my room. I'll see to them.”

Francy stood. “Yes, ma'am. Anything else while I'm out?”

“No, not that I can think of.”

As Rebecca feared, the man's bags proved a constant reminder, and instead of her pain lessening, spotting the grips rubbed salt into her wounded heart.

Three days out from Panama City—according to the purser—she took to her knees when night fell and prayed until the wee hours. Finally, a peace settled over her soul.

His grace was sufficient.

She had her boys, and they needed her. They were her life now, her focus. It would have been horrible for them to have a heathen for a father.

In three weeks or so, she'd be home, with plenty to fill her days. She slipped in next to Michael. He still asked about Mister Marc some, but once in Texas, he'd have plenty of men folks, and a pony and puppy and....

She snuggled him in tight. Better than all that, a mother who

loved him with her whole heart.

Just as she slipped into a light doze, another reality engulfed her. She had no business marrying anyone. And with Wallace hardly cold! What would he think of her jumping into marriage with the Major?

Probably turn over in his grave, especially with Marcus not being a believer.

Little hands on her cheeks woke her way too soon.

“Mama, Gabe’s stinky and hungry.”

She pried one eye open. That was her life now, and she loved it.



On the exact same morning, over a thousand nautical miles north, Jethro Risen, too, had been up late praying. But instead of waking with the Lord’s peace, an unremembered dream hung over his soul like a horrible storm rolling in from the ocean.

Throughout his morning routine, occasional rays of light pierced the gloom. If only the Lord would speak. But no word came as to battling the evil that threatened.

The instant his foot touched the carriage’s iron step, the night vision returned.

MARCUS NEEDS YOU

“Lord?”

His driver who held the door turned toward him. “What did you say, Mister Risen?”

He held up his hand. “Take me to the wharf.”

“Yes, sir.”

In the few minutes it took to reach the docks, Jethro prayed. Though the remembered dream made no sense, no other word came. Who could the woman holding a baby, trudging through waist high swampy water be?

Fear cloaked her like a death shroud. Who could she represent?

Their skin sickly pale—hers and the baby’s—stretched taunt over their faces. Around her sunken eyes, a pale gray shadowed.

Did they have the fever?

Why was he seeing the horror?

The coach came to a stop. Its driver jumped down and opened the door. Jethro climbed out, but wasn’t sure where to go or what to do. For a while, he strolled along the docks, then a three-story hotel that sat along the water’s edge caught his eye.

MARCUS NEEDS YOU

Jethro marched through the lobby to the main desk. The clerk

looked up. "Good morning, sir. A room with a view is only a dollar extra."

"I'm looking for a friend of mine, Marcus Ford. Is he registered?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you seen him this morning?"

"No, sir. To my knowledge, he hasn't left his room. Barely picked at the meals he ordered, too. Leaves them outside his door. The bellman has inquired as to his health, but the man claims he needs no assistance."

Jethro fished out a half dollar and placed it on the counter. "His room number."

"Third floor, sir. Room sixteen. It's on the ocean side."

What had happened for Marcus to miss the boat? Last he saw of him, he and Rebecca walked up the gangplank hand in hand. Jethro found the door with the brass numbers and raised his hand.

Before he could bring his knuckles down, a knowing overwhelmed him.

He stood in the corner of the bedroom lit only by one oil lamp. The swamp lady and her baby lay in a bed drenched in sweat. A much younger Marcus took turns mopping the mother's brow then daubing the child's cheeks and neck.

The vision faded then reappeared, but then the Major knelt in a cemetery full of ornate crosses and little concrete houses.

The man mourned his dead.

A hand tugged his coat. He turned.

A twelve or thirteen-year-old girl stood behind him. "Tell Daddy not to miss heaven. Tell him it's wonderful."

Instantly, the knowing came. The young lady was Marcus' daughter. But Jethro wasn't the least bit troubled by the ghost. "I will."

"Tell him his Mimi girl will be waiting for him." She smiled then vanished.



Jethro filled his lungs then tapped on the door.

Nothing. No sounds within.

He rapped harder, again only dead silence. Upon turning the knob, it moved in his hand and he cracked the door open. “Marcus?”

Nary a word. Jethro walked through the sitting room to the bedroom’s entry. The man he sought sat in a chair beside the window. His chin rested on his chest. Was he dead?

Nearing, he spoke louder. “Marcus.”



Like a foghorn off in the distance, his name followed by soft words rolled around Ford, but gave no direction. Swamp waters lapped at his chest, higher with each step, as he slipped deeper into the mire and muck.

Snakes slithered by, darting their forked tongues. Moss hung from branches he couldn’t reach or even see the trunks they grew from.

Flies and mosquitoes buzzed, and biting fish and turtles nipped at his legs. The stench of rotting flesh filled his nostrils.

So what if he was lost. What did it matter? She’d left and wouldn’t be returning. Cursed, that’s what he was. All his loves—dead or alive—lost to him.

Something touched his shoulder. A voice shouted his name. One eye cracked open. Jethro Risen stood next to him, neck-deep in the swamp. “Save yourself. I’m doomed.”

The man tugged on his arm. “No, you aren’t. Come on, friend, I’m taking you home.”

Ford let his love’s brother-in-law leverage him to his feet. How

had he gotten to dry ground? "Leave me be, Jethro. She doesn't love me. Nothing else matters."

"That's a lie. Rebecca loves you. What happened? Why'd you miss the boat?"

Tears welled. His head hung low.

"She said... She couldn't marry me." He filled his lungs, sniffed, then heard her words again for the thousandth time; the pain they caused still as fresh as the moment she spoke them. "She said I had to believe, and...."

He pushed away from Risen, but his knees gave.

The man caught him just as the fog engulfed him again. Once more, he trudged through the swamp, neck-deep water, wanting only to slip below the murky surface and find peace for his aching heart.

Strong hands lifted him up and dragged him from the ill-sustaining refuge. Then somehow, he rode in a carriage with Jethro Risen.

Someone gave him a drink of water and a piece of bread.

Half-carried, half-led, he climbed the stairs to his old familiar room. The last domicile in which his heart knew joy and peace. Why not? They would know if Rebecca returned and rouse him.

He crawled into bed and slept practically before his head touched the feather pillow.

The aroma of fresh-brewed coffee wakened him. Where were his clothes? Instead of hanging over the chair where he usually left them, he discovered three new shirts and a pair of trousers hanging in the chifforobe.

The chest of drawers held everything else needed, and his boots stood beside the wingback freshly shined. Dressing quickly, he made his way down to the kitchen. Was it morning or night?

Jethro Risen sat at the table sipping from a steaming mug. The cook spotted him, grinned her toothless smile, then fetched him a cup with two sugars and a splash of milk, exactly how he liked it. "Here you are, sir."

"Good morning, Marcus. How are you this fine day?"

He shrugged. "Same I guess."

"Hungry?"

"Coffee's fine. Where are my clothes?"

"Off to the laundry."

"Do I have any money left?"

His host chuckled. "You do. Over two hundred, and I've got it in my office for you."

Ford wasn't exactly sure what to make of Risen. "Why?"

The man who should be his brother-in-law, but would never be, shrugged. "Why what?"

“Why’d you bring me here?”

“Yesterday morning, the Lord told me you needed me. I thought you’d left, and was a bit confused, but He’s the one who led me to you.”

Ford studied the coffee in his cup. Great. How could a rational man believe that God would care enough to send Risen to find him? He looked up. The cook grinned at him on her way out, and he faced his friend. “I don’t care to argue with you, Jethro, over what’s true and what you believe, but that’s not much of an answer.”

“I had no way of knowing you weren’t steaming toward Panama.”

“No difference. Rebecca’s gone. Just like Julia and Michele. So, that’s that.” The words stabbed his heart anew. Gone, they were all gone.

“Night before last, I dreamed about you and your family. At first, I didn’t remember it after I woke up, then just as my foot touched the carriage’s step yesterday morning, it all came back.”

“Tell me more.”

“You were frantic, trying to bring their fevers down. I sensed your pain and heartache. Then when I got to the wharf, I wasn’t sure where to go. I glanced at the hotel, and the Lord told me the same thing again. He said, ‘Marcus needs you.’”

“So you’re saying this Almighty God knows me by my name.” He couldn’t help the sarcastic tone. “Come on, Jethro. I’m an intelligent man. I mean, I admit being in a fog, but....”

“Once I thought the very same way. I did. I thought Moses Jones was a fool for buying into religion, full well knowing that had been one of the main reasons that drew me to the man and made me want to partner with him.”

“Easy to understand.”

“I saw Jesus in him—His love and peace and wisdom. I just didn’t know at the time that’s exactly what it was. I do now.”

“Hey. Moses is a good man. So are you, Jethro, but explain to me then why your God isn’t so nice. Why does this supposed benevolent Creator allow so much evil in the world? How could He let my Julia—who’d never done anything to anyone—die? And my daughter! She was only six months old. Didn’t even see her first birthday. Tell me why.”

The man stared at him for the longest, then smiled. “I saw her twice. Once in the dream...a baby...then again right before I knocked on your hotel room door.”

Ford shook his head. What rubbish. “That so?”

“Yes, sir. A beautiful young lady—maybe twelve, not more than thirteen—she looks nothing like you, Marcus, but in my heart, I knew she was yours. She said, ‘Tell Daddy not to miss Heaven. It’s a

wonderful place.”

How cruel could someone be? Claiming to have seen his baby all grownup was nothing but heartless. But...she would be that age, and how could the man know? He glared. “Did she say anything else?” He hated being so cynical, but Risen deserved it.

“Yes, she did. Said, ‘Tell him his Mimi Girl is waiting for him.’ ”

“What? Who told you I called her Mimi?”

“It’s what she said. God allowed for Samuel to come back to talk with King Saul, and Jesus saw Moses and Elijah on the mount. Some folks believe that when you dream about a loved one who’s gone to Heaven, it’s the Lord letting them come visit.”

If only it could be true. A spark kindled a burning in his soul. “What did she look like?”

“Shoulder length dark brown hair, brown eyes, button nose. High cheek bones, her face a bit on the slender side, but it all worked so well together.”

Tears overflowed. The man described Julia to a T.

“Oh, yes. For some reason, I noticed her right eye was darker than the left by a few shades. I almost forgot that. But it didn’t distract from her beauty.”

He had seen her. Could it be? His baby lived and waited for him in heaven? “Help me, Jethro. If all this is real, I don’t want to miss Heaven. What must I do?”

“Confess Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead.”

“That’s it? That’s all I have to do? Confess and believe? Nothing else?”

“No, sir. That’s it. We’re saved by grace through faith.”

“I don’t have to join a church?”

He smiled. “Believers are the church.”

Ford filled his lungs. His heart pounded against his ribs. Could it be real? It sounded as though this God was reaching out to Him.

IT IS REAL YOU ARE MY BELOVED AND I DESIRE THAT YOU COME TO ME

“Jesus is Lord, and....” He glanced at his friend. “Like that?”

“Yes, sir. Exactly like that.”

A warmth washed over his soul and he closed his eyes for what seemed like several minutes, before he opened them and looked again at the man. “And God raised from the dead?”

“Yes, Marcus.”

“And I need to believe it though?”

“With all your heart.”

“My heart, not my mind?”

“Believe with all your heart, your soul, and your mind.”

He exhaled, then smiled and closed his eyes again. "Help me, Lord. Help me believe." He cleared his throat. "I believe that You raised Jesus from the dead...with all my heart...all my soul...and all my mind."

The instant the words left his lips, a weight lifted off from him. His heart...was new. He was free, clean, like he'd never been before.

"Wow! I never... It's awesome. What now?"

"Nothing that you have to do, though there's a lot you'll want to do."

Didn't make much sense. But then God loving him didn't add up either. Why would He?

"Explain yourself."



Lack of movement brought Michael all the way awake. He rubbed his eyes real good, rolling over to be sure. His mama stood by the little window. "Are there pirates?"

She turned around and smiled. "No, sweetie. We've arrived at Panama City and will be going ashore in a few minutes. Would you like that? There's so much I want to show you!"

He snorted. Where were all the swashbucklers? That's who he wanted to meet. He and his mother and brother had been on the high seas forever and nothing! "Is this where we ride the train?"

"Yes, sir. It certainly is."

"Will Mister Marc be here?"

"No, baby. He's back in San Francisco."

"I'm not the baby, I'm the big boy, remember?"

"Yes, I do. Sorry, sugar."

"Me and Gabe miss him. When is he coming? I thought you said he was coming."

"I did. I thought he was. And so do I miss him, but..." She hiked her shoulders like she wasn't sad and didn't care that much, but she sounded sad a little.

He stood on the bed and bounced several times, laughing. He could cheer her up. She held her arms out, and he flung his arms wide and jumped. She caught him then pulled him in tight. He sure loved his new mama, loved the way she smelled.

No one he ever knew smelled as good as her.

But he loved Mister Marc, too. He leaned back and looked her in the eyes, just like she'd taught him. "Do him a letter, tell him to hurry up and come to Texas."

His mama smiled, but not her real happy one. He hadn't seen that

biggest grin since the night of the party. “Not a bad idea. We’ll do that exact thing. Will you help me? Maybe paint him a picture.”

“I’ll color pirates and ’gators and...” The images swirled. He wiggled down, ready to draw that very minute. Looked around. “Where’s my special paper and watercolor paints? And I need them brushes Mister Marc gave me.”

“Those brushes, my sweetest heart.”

“Yep, you’re right. I need those brushes.”

“Michael...remember? Yes, ma’am. It isn’t polite for big boys to say yep to an adult.”

“Yes, ma’am. Got to show reeee-spect! Right?” He climbed into the chair in front of the small desk and swung his feet.



Francy loved Panama City. Even more, she loved getting a couple of hours alone with Bonnie Claire. Having an aunt only two years older proved so much fun. The foot traffic throbbed in the heart of the city.

Festive shops with their bright colors and merchandise obviously from all over the world lined the streets. And the prices seemed so reasonable! She paid for her latest purchase, waited for Bonnie to do the same, then nodded toward a café across the plaza.

“Care for a spot of tea?” She used a contrived British accent and giggled.

Bonnie raised her nose half an inch then stiffened her upper lip. “Bloody good idea, my dear.”

Her fake English sounded better, but then she’d been there. Wouldn’t that be a lark? Touring Europe with her famous step-grandmother author.

Except, since Francy was adopted, yet so accepted as a family member, she figured dropping the step would be a great idea. After all, MayMee was the only grandmother she’d ever have.

On her first trip to Texas, she’d not really been aware of MayMee’s fame or storytelling powers. This time would be different. She’d been a kid back then. Wouldn’t such a trip be something to tell her children? She grinned at Bonnie.

“So tell me true, Auntie.” She teased her with the relational moniker. “How’s married life?”

Her aunt giggled. “Well...” Her eyes widened, and she leaned in. “I never dreamed...” She hugged herself. “I mean...well...” She looked off, smiled even bigger, then looked back. “All I can say is that you best snag yourself a Briggs man before they’re all gone.”

“Gwen told me the same thing.” She looked around the sidewalk. No one seemed to be paying any attention, neither looking nor listening. “I’ve been toying with the idea of going back to San Francisco from here.”

“Really? Why ever would you do such a thing?”

“Marcus Ford.”

“Francine Myrtle Risen!”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Well then, don’t you dare even think about the Major! That would break Rebecca’s heart if you were to take up with him. She loves him true...and he loves her! What a waste of your time that would be!”

For a few booms of her heart, she contemplated telling Bonnie about her kiss and how Ford kissed her back, but from the tone of disgust and disdain in Bonnie’s voice, checked the keep-your-mouth-shut box.

“But she’s the one who keeps pushing him away. I mean if she doesn’t want him...”

“Francy, no. Forget about that crazy idea. Do you hear me? He loves Rebecca. Loves her, do you hear me?”

But he kissed me back! She so wanted to tell her, but refrained from saying more and giving Bonnie any more fodder. Besides, she’d be forced to admit her own culpability in the matter, so she best let sleeping dogs slumber on the porch.

“Well? Do you?”

“Yes. But he kissed me.” Oh no, there it was. At least, someone knew.

“What? When?”



Bonnie couldn’t believe her ears. How could it be true?
Marcus Ford had kissed the girl?

She leaned back in her chair and looked up and down the sidewalk, then through the café's window. No one watched or seemed to be listening. Mercy! She reined in her first inclination—run straight to the train station.

But Rebecca planned on staying aboard until the last minute. Plus, Bonnie needed to hear the whole story.

“When did this happen?”

For once, the cat took firm hold on the diminutive spitfire's tongue. She shrugged, shook her head, and looked away. However, her lips thinned into a self-satisfied grin that Bonnie didn't care one iota for.

“No way, Francy! You can't clam up now. I need particulars, circumstances, details! I want to know it all. The whole truth, or I'm going to have to say something to my sister.”

Turning back, a look of concern replaced her grin. “Look, forget I said anything. I told Rebecca I'd go Texas with her to help with the boys and...well... I shouldn't have said anything.”

“But you did. The Good Book says that out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. You wanted me to know. Truth be told, I figure you're hoping I'll encourage you to go back. Now tell me exactly when and where Marcus Ford kissed you.”

Had to have happened before the wedding. It pained Bonnie beyond measure the younger woman got a first kiss before her, but then she wasn't married and... Wait a minute! “Was that all it was? Just a kiss?”



Francy wanted to slug her auntie dear for even thinking she would have let things get out of hand. “Yes, Bonnie Claire Briggs. Of course it was just a kiss! And if you must know...” She scrunched her shoulders.

Her mouth had gotten her in trouble one more time. Perhaps her young aunt had a point about hoping for encouragement to go back.

But she had given her word.

“I'm serious, and you're not telling me anything. Now let's start with where the two of you were when this illicit smooch took place.”

“The parlor. He'd been working all night on the family portrait, and well...it...he...looked so...and I just...then he just...and that was that.”

“Francy, you're are not telling me the whole truth with all the specifics I expect. Out with it all...now!”

She pressed her lips together and sighed. No way around it. If only she had held her tongue. She'd tried to hold back the words...

unsuccessfully. “He looked so peaceful, sitting there in the wingback, resting his eyes. And his lips...so full and tender. I mean you know how handsome he is.”

“That is absolutely no excuse. So you kissed him? While he slept? Francy!”

“Hey...I might have kissed him first, but then he grabbed me and pulled me into his lap and kissed me back. It was so wonderful.” The remembrance of the moment caused her to swoon inside.”

“He didn’t!”

She came almost immediately to her senses and opened her eyes. “Well, he claimed he thought I was Rebecca, but he knew what he was doing. I could tell.”

Bonnie snorted a very unladylike huff. “So. He didn’t kiss you after all! He’d been working all night on the painting, fell asleep in the chair, and you kissed him. Have I got all that right? Is that what happened?”

“Yes, but he kissed me back.” Oh, why had she said anything? Bonnie was getting it all wrong. Tears threatened, but she did her best to blink them away. It wasn’t fair!

Her aunt filled her lungs then leaned in and patted her hand. “Don’t cry. I’m not going to say a word about this, and you shouldn’t either. You know how much he loves Rebecca, or at least you should! Besides, the Major is too old for you.”

“Oh, he is not. We’re both adults.”

“Besides.” She ignored the age debate, grinning. “Jasper and I have been talking, and we think you and Hunter will be perfect for each other.”

Francy shrugged. “Hunter, you say? Is that Jasper’s brother?”

“Nephew.”

For the next few minutes, Bonnie told her about the young man. Probably would be for the best not to head back. Her parents wouldn’t understand either, and the Briggs nephew sounded interesting.

After several questions, Bonnie stood and gathered her things. “Let’s talk while we walk. Still have time for a few more shops before the train if we hurry.”



Ford set his grip down and faced Jethro. “Thank you for all you’ve done. Praise the Lord for sending you.”

“Amen to that.” The man grinned. “I upgraded your ticket.” He handed over a brass key. “Room three-twelve. Mary Rachel sent some extra things. Amos stowed them in your room.”

“Thank you again, but she shouldn’t. You’ve both done so much.”

“It’s a blessing to bless others. Believe me.” He held out his hand.

Ford took it, pulled Jethro into a hug, then held him out at arm’s length. “I’m going to miss you, Brother.”

“Same here. Beware the wiles of the devil. Seems he especially hates new believers.”

“Right. But he’s defeated by the Blood of the Lamb and the Word of our testimony.”

“Yes, sir! And we will not love our lives, even unto death.”

The ship’s horn sounded. Ford glanced over his shoulder. What a shame his love wasn’t standing on the rail, waiting for him to board. His stupid pride had ruined that. He faced Jethro again.

“You’re a good teacher, and I will continue to study Scriptures. Hopefully, the next time you see me, I’ll be happily married, and we’ll be kin outside of Christ, too.”

“I’m praying to that end.”

At another longer blast, Jethro nodded toward the gangplank. “Have a safe trip.”

Ford backed up a step. A bit of foreboding tugged at his heart. He hated the leaving along with the thought of being a new Christian without Jethro and Brother Paul close by, but he had to find Rebecca and tell her his good news.

“Kiss Mary and the girls for me.” He grinned. “Punch Boaz on the arm. If you tell him it’s from his Uncle Marcus, he’ll know what it’s for.”

The man nodded. “Go on now.”

He found his room, then after a quick inspection realized he loved first class. Still, the Risens should not have spent so much money on him.

Then again, if the stories he’d heard held true, God had given them barrels and barrels of gold nuggets stashed away in the bank. Probably they weren’t even sure how much money they had.

None of it belonged to him, of course.

Hey, if they wanted to bless him, then praise the Lord! Brother Paul showed him the scripture that said all good things came down from above. That reminded him of what Rebecca said about there being no such thing as luck—good or bad.

All good things come from the Lord. That’s how he’d put it.

That night after a nice supper—his meal ticket provided—he retreated to his room and read his Bible for a while. Kneeling beside his bed, for the longest, he praised and blessed the Lord then gave voice to his heart’s desire.

“Father, keep Rebecca safe. Soften her heart toward me. Help her forgive me for running off and being so prideful.”



The short train ride then getting settled aboard the new steamer helped Rebecca keep her five-year-old distracted, but as though he would never abandon his desire to be a pirate, he insisted repeatedly that she not forget her promise to write his Mister Marc a letter. Send him all the pictures he'd painted.

But what could she pen? I love you, but... What good would that do?

Maybe she should explain how she'd realized that she had no business even thinking of another man so soon after Wallace's death. Though that wouldn't serve to make him feel any better than it did her; the heart would love whom the heart....

A heavy sigh escaped, and with it, the thought of that love rode the breath out, leaving her so empty.

But she had her boys.

Michael and Gabriel were her life. She didn't need a man to have a good, full, and very happy life.

The evening the steamer dropped anchor in the Mississippi River, Michael didn't bring up his Mister Marc or the stack of watercolors he'd painted. At least not until Gabe gave it up, and it was just her and her son cuddling in bed.

"Want me to read from your new book?"

He sat up. "Can we send my pictures tomorrow? Miss Francy says we be in Narleans and they have a post office where you take letters."

"New Orleans."

"That's it. Can we?"

"I haven't finished my letter yet."

He wrinkled his nose. "Then you write too slow, Mama. Just say hello. Come to Texas. We miss you."

"Slowly, Michael." If it were only that easy.

The child started over, drawing each word out. "Juuuust saaaaaay helllllooooo."

Laughter burst into the room, and she tickled his ribs. "No, silly willy! I meant your grammar. When you said I write too slow...it should be I write too slowly."

Little giggles highlighted her laughing, and her heart soared.

"For sure we can send your paintings from here. And you'll have time in the morning to do one more if you'd like. The Purser said we don't dock until noon."

Nodding, he snuggled in tight. "Read now, Mama, before the sandman comes."

The boy made it all of three pages, leaving her totally alone in the gulf of silence with all her what-ifs.

Father, settle my heart. Ease its pain. Give Your sweet peace to me.

The next morning while Michael worked on his latest masterpiece, she penned a short note she hoped he wouldn't take as any encouragement. Together with her son, she posted the rather fat, oversized envelope on her way to see her lawyer.



In her new lavender dress, Francy took one last look at the portrait then faced her aunt who sat next to her on the bed.

"Remarkable how much she looks like me."

"I thought so, too."

"You going to send it to him?"

"No. I'll write him. Let him know my lawyer found it. Ask him if he wants it."

"Think he'll stay in San Francisco? Put roots down there, I mean."

"I have no idea. Hopefully, he'll find a good teaching position."

"Daddy said he could keep him busy painting portraits if he wanted to do that. He could certainly make a living at it."

"Mary Rachel mentioned that one morning, but he didn't seem too interested. I also thought about him illustrating Mother May's pirate books, but..." She shrugged and stared at the portrait. "I wish now, he'd never found it."

"Why?"

She leaned out, glanced at Michael who seemed preoccupied with his toy train, mouthed later, then smiled. "So, you get unpacked?"

"Not yet. Want to help me?"

"I'd love to."

With the adjoining door open, her aunt kept her voice low.

"Michael is dead set on having Marcus as his father. I'd just as soon the Major stay out of our lives. Let us all forget him."

"He's a hard man to put out of your mind." Why had she said that? "I mean, isn't he?" Especially since she'd seen the portrait of his dead wife.

No wonder she kept catching the man staring at her. But not because he was interested. What a fool she'd been. But at least Bonnie had kept her from turning back at Panama City.

"You in love with him, too?"

The question jolted her from her ruminations. "No! I mean... well...there is something I need to tell you. It's been bothering me,

and I think just now, I figured it all out.”



After only a few words, Rebecca pulled the young lady away from the door. Wouldn't do for her son to see her claw Francy's eyes out. Then after the initial shock wore off, it pleased her that Marcus—in his dreams—had mistaken the girl for her.

It all made perfect sense. He hadn't been flirting with the young lady, had only seen his dead wife in her face.

Yet, he still professed his love for her.

Shame the man was a heathen. A bigger shame she'd only been a widow for such a short time.

All in all, the whole affair proved just a shame all the way around the stump!

“Do you then?”

She tried to remember the question, but couldn't and offered a little shrug. “I'm sorry. Guess I got lost there for a minute.”

“Understandable, seeing as how you're about to have a conniption fit over the man.”

She exhaled. Maybe she was, but still... She'd made the right decision. Of that, she remained certain. She could live without any man. “So what was your question again?”

“Will you forgive me?”

She'd like to send her out to find a peach switch, but then that wouldn't be right. Francy was a grown woman, and Rebecca herself had also stolen a kiss from the man. “Yes, of course I forgive you. Especially if you have learned your lesson not to be sparking with men whom you are not married to!”

“What if I'm engaged?”

“How about you ask the Lord, and let Him direct your steps?”

Francy nodded, grinned real big, then hugged her neck. “I love you, Auntie.”

“I love you too, sweetie.”

A little hand tugged on her dress. “How about me? You two got any sugars left for me?”



Michael put both hands on his mother's cheeks. "Mama, you awake?"

"No."

That didn't make any sense. "Yes, you am." He scooched higher and kissed her lips. "What's her name?"

Her near eye opened a smidgen. He liked that word. "Of whom do you speak?"

"Sissy! What's her name?"

Both eyes popped open. "You don't have a sister."

"Do so." He made his head bob extra big. "Me and Gabe rode our ponies and Sissy was crying on account of you and Daddy wouldn't let her ride, too. But I don't know her name."

"Oh." She scooted up in bed and smiled. He loved it when she looked happy like that. "So Gabe rode, too. Then he was big in your dream?"

He nodded, except it seemed like yesterday not last night. "Brother don't ride too good, not like me or Daddy. What is her name, Mama? Do you know it? She's very pretty."

She shrugged. "I don't know. What do you think it ought to be?"

"How about..." He closed one eye and twisted his mouth around, but it didn't help him think any better. "I don't know either. Let's ask Daddy when he comes."



Poor little darling.

Rebecca didn't know what to say, so she snuggled in and kissed his neck until he backed away laughing. Then she grabbed the extra

pillow and bopped him with it. He did an extra big roll and barely caught himself at the bed's edge.

He stood on the mattress and jumped. "Is this the stagecoach day?"

"Yes, sir. Sure is. Are you ready?"

He nodded. "Do I get my pony and puppy today?"

"Well, we might have to look around for just the right ones, but your Grandpa, that's my daddy."

"I know that. You already told me, but I don't know him."

"Oh, I guess I did, and don't worry. You will love him. Anyway, he can help us. He's the best horse trader in all of Texas."

"Want me to give you some girly time?"

"That would be nice." She looked toward the baby bed. Little brother slept on. What a blessing that baby turned out to be.

Finally, her foot touched the dock in Jefferson. She loved being home, loved Texas beyond measure. If only Michael's words proved prophetic, and Marcus was coming. But then, it would just break her heart anew.

Daddy indeed.

No and double no. She'd be the laughingstock of Red River County—if not the whole state. Marrying a non-believer so soon after Wallace's death, one of the most famous Rangers.

The idea of being the subject of gossip or the butt of jokes for years to come definitely elicited disdain, not her aspirations at all. Forget that they loved each other. The old biddies would call him a gold digger and her a cradle robber.

Nevermind she wasn't that much older than the Major.

Oh, Lord, heal my broken heart.

She stopped at the wharf's end. Bonnie joined her while Jasper with his little tagalong oversaw the stevedore's unloading of their things.

"I overheard Michael telling his Uncle Jasper that his daddy was coming."

Rebecca faced her sister. "He dreamed that Marcus and I were married and had given him a little sister."

"Poor guy, I figured he would have forgotten about the Major by now."

"No, it's actually gotten worse. Besides the ten watercolors we posted in New Orleans, he's done seven more in the five days it took us to get here. At least this morning—we were eating breakfast—he told me not to mail them; that his daddy was coming to Texas. That he'd be here any day."

"I'm so sorry, but the poet claims time heal all wounds."

"I pray that comes sooner rather than later." She gave her sis a

smile, though the gesture lacked heart. Didn't seem like there'd ever be enough time to get over Marcus Aurelius Ford. Using his middle name brought a bit of mirth to her soul, but also a sadness that she'd never get to use the moniker against him.

The first station the coach stopped at fascinated Michael. By the last trump, the child was so worn out from the constant swaying and bouncing, he hardly realized the trip's end. She'd done it!

Gone to California...found her sons...and brought them home. The accomplishment served as oil for wounds.

Bonnie and Jasper to boot.

If only Marcus loved her enough....



"They're here!"

The hollered announcement followed by his baby's girl's high-pitched scream broke Henry's concentration.

Would his youngest ever stop being so dramatic? He rolled up the house plans, stowed them in their leather tube, then hurried out to the porch and joined his wife and the growing welcoming crowd.

Indigo crawled out from under the steps, shook himself real big, then took his usual spot beside Henry's right leg. Still couldn't decide if this one or the dog's grandsire was the best ever.

Nice dilemma to have. All of Blue Dog's progeny proved to be smarter than average, but the fourth generation shone bright in the hound's descendants.

The carriage came to a stop. The door flung open, and folks poured out even before the dust settled. Bless the Lord. Two of his grown girls home.

Tears, cheers, and a few jeers from Houston and Crockett for their new brother accompanied plenty of hugs and howdys for the two new little boys.

What a shock her letter had been, but... understandable. Rebecca shouldn't have to spend out her days alone. She'd had mothered all five of her little sisters, and two sons of her own would keep her home happy.

After greetings, he waited until the shank of the evening to invite her to join him and May in his library for a nightcap. Through half his toddy, he let the ladies, sitting across his desk from him, chat—mostly about her beloved sons.

But the point arrived that he couldn't wait any longer. He'd seen the sadness in her eyes from the first and needed to know if someone deserved to die.

“What’s wrong, Rebecca?”

Closing her eyes, she leaned back and filled her lungs. She looked first to May then to him. “Should have known there’d be no keeping it from you, but...there’s nothing to be done, Daddy. Believe me. My heart aches, that’s for sure and certain, but time heals all wounds. Isn’t that what the poets tell us?”

That didn’t make sense. Sure, she’d experienced a whole range of emotions over Wallace’s death, but a broken heart? He wouldn’t have thought it. “What happened? Your letter sounded so cheery.”

“You know me so well.” She blinked back tears. “Oh, Daddy, on the stage to Jefferson....”

The flood gates opened. May got up and sat next to her on the arm of the wingback, stroking her hair while Rebecca intermittently told the story and sobbed softly. Took more tears than words, but she finally told her tale.

“In the end, I had to put it out of my mind and think on things worthy of a good report. I’ve got a new life with my boys now.”

“You did the right thing, baby.” He wanted to say more, but how could he? Ford was a good man, but until he saw the error of his ways, Henry would not give his blessing. “Are you positive? About loving him?”

She nodded, wiped her cheeks, then pursed her lips like trying to hold back words that needed to be spoken.

“When he showed up at Mercy House...well...there’s something I left out. I was so shocked at him being there. And it just happened so suddenly, but I’ve known ever since that I do love him.”

His compassionate wife pressed her cheek to his oldest’s. “What happened, dear?”

“It was so spontaneous. I never even thought.... But as certain as I was that moment that I’d love him forever, I also knew I couldn’t marry him.”

“Thangs can change, darling.”

“I know that’s true, but... At first I thought it was just him not believing, but also realized...how could I face Wallace if I was to marry Ford so quickly after his home-going? And there’s the age difference.” She glanced up at May. “I’m older.”

“Oh, honey, that doesn’t make so much a difference when you’re both adults.”

“Look at me.” He chuckled. “I robbed the cradle.”

“And God could still save him, too. I never in a million years thought for one heartbeat that He existed, much less that He’d even want me. Maybe there’s a –”

“No, Mother. I’ve put it all behind me...left him in San Francisco, and my life’s here. In Texas. But sometimes. It just. Hurts so bad.”

“The pain dulls in time, but you skipped right over what he did at the orphanage.”

“Oh, did I?”

“Yes, ma’am, you did, and you’re still dodging your mama’s question.”

She looked at May then back and pressed hard into the chair. “I... uh... basically threw myself at him, kissed him... then I realized what I’d done and apologized.”

“Oh, is that all?” Henry did his best to keep concern from showing with a grin. He hated asking, but she’d be his baby girl until the day he died. “Just the once? Nothing else?”

“Yes, Daddy. I couldn’t tell you the number of times I was tempted, but yes. Just the one time, and he’s always been the perfect gentleman. Never taken any liberties at all.”

“I will put him on my prayer list. Who knows? The Lord works in mysterious ways.”

“Yes, He does.” His beloved’s lips spread into a little smile. “Now if you two will excuse me, I promised Michael a pirate story.” May stood, kissed the top of her head, then floated out, closing the door behind her.

“Speaking of promises, I owe the boy a pony and puppy. Know of any Indigo Blue pups available?”

A chuckle escaped. “I knew that.” Henry nodded. “While you and Bonnie were hugging everyone, Michael wanted to know about his pony and puppy.”

“What’d you tell him?”

“Told him wasn’t sure where they were, but that we’d not leave a stone unturned until we found them.”

“That satisfy him?”

“Not really, but I introduced him to Indigo. That seemed to make him happy.” Another chortle escaped. “He then told me that my dog would do.”

She grinned. “He’s not bashful. First time I saw him, he demanded I put his baby down. Told me his little brother was not for sale.”

Boy, dogs and horse banter aplenty. He loved having her home again where she belonged, loved listening to her stories. Seemed to him his oldest had fallen into true love for the first time in her life.

Despite his protest that they’d just gotten there, Bonnie and Jasper left the next morning for the Briggs’ homestead. Then while all the glad handers watched as the newlyweds left, it dawned on him that he had a whole new situation needing his attention.

Mercy, Lord.

Both Houston and Bart—so obvious it hurt—made eyes at his adopted granddaughter from California. One’s niece and the other’s

cousin, but thank goodness, no blood relations. She'd grown into quite a lovely young lady.

Bonnie promised they'd be back for Sunday dinner and bring Hunter to see the boys.

Mm-hmmm. Mercy, Lord.



Francy loved it, but best be careful. Wouldn't do to be the cause of the cousins coming to fisticuffs. She hurried up the steps, both young men right behind her.

Should she forget the notion that she would only consider older suitors? They were both so handsome. She really liked it when Bart got flustered, and Houston...he didn't act anything like an uncle.

How weird would that be? Him marrying his older niece? Except he'd already pointed out that he and she were not blood kin.

Best of all, come Sunday, she'd have a way to make Hunter Briggs jealous. Bonnie promised to put a bee in the man's ear about her, and he'd be at the services. Ought to be an interesting day all around.

Then the Saturday after that was the newlywed's big party. Bart said they'd move the dining table against the wall to give everyone room to dance. She adored the Virginia Reel.

With a mental twirl, she changed partners with each one of them wanting her more than the last.

That afternoon after chores, the boys found her in the kitchen, helping Miss Jewel peel potatoes.

"Want to play bases?"

She eyed Bart who grinned. "What's that?"

"It's like Rounders or Town Ball, but better. You hit the ball then run to base."

She picked up another spud. "No, but you two go ahead."

Houston stepped in front of his cousin. "How about charades after supper?"

"That would be fun. Who else can we get to play?"

Play she did, but always careful to walk the straight and narrow between the two young men, never giving either more attention than the other.

Sunday finally arrived, and as Bonnie promised, she brought her to a cluster of what had to be her new in-laws. Tickled her that the whole bunch favored so.

Her aunt stopped next to her husband then looked to the young man standing beside him. "Hunter." She turned and extended her hand. "This is Mary Rachel's adopted daughter we've been telling you

about, Francine Risen.”

The man smiled then held out his hand. “Howdy, Francine. Good to see you again.”

She took his offering and looked him straight in his eyes. “Please. Call me Francy. Did we get to meet when I was here before? I’m sorry, there were so many new people.”

“We did.” He looked past her then back. “Looks like the preacher’s about to start.” He held out his arm, and she took it.



Henry hung back while everyone else found their seats. Be a tossup as to who was madder, Houston or Bart. Neither one liked the young lady sitting next to the Briggs boy. Blood feuds had been started over less.

Levi and Rose had seen it all. He looked skyward.

Thank You, Lord, that my right-hand man isn’t off somewhere. Don’t know if I could put all three of those young men to the ground if a fight broke out.

After the announcements and opening prayer, he relaxed some.

All three were God-fearing, and hopefully, they’d not do or say anything in the Lord’s house. He slipped in next to his wife. She grinned like she considered the whole thing humorous or maybe as if he was being a ninny, but she just didn’t understand.

Two hardheaded bulls would go at it until one was dead, and his boys were about as hardheaded as they came. Boys. They weren’t anymore. Bloodied veterans instead. Way more men than boys.

Shame Charley and Lacey hadn’t made it to town. Both Houston and Bart were liable to listen to their old sergeant better than anyone.

Folks stood. He took the cue. May leaned in just as the congregation began singing and put her mouth close to his ear. “Relax, Henry. It’ll all work itself out.”



That Sunday evening, Henry stayed in the parlor way longer than he wanted. Either his concerns were overblown, or the boys knew better than to start anything in his presence. Finally, he got the newlyweds in Bonnie's old room, and Hunter tucked safely away in the bunkhouse.

Half-grown kids needing sitting like toddlers.

Ridiculous. He'd think they would....

He grinned in spite of himself. So far, they all turned out to be fine adults, individuals he was proud to call his own. Not a rotten one in the bunch. And that proved better than he could say for a lot of families in the county.

Had to give glory where it was due though. He looked toward the ceiling and blessed his Heavenly Father.

Before he could get the plans out for the new house he intended to build for May and incorporate the changes he'd thought of during supper, knuckles rapped on his door, putting that most pleasant of chores on the back burner.

His sweet wife grinned then voiced the entrance of more young'uns. "Come in, boys."

Henry shot her a questioning look, but saying nothing, she took the extra straight back, leaving the wingbacks free.

"Pa." Houston entered first and took the far seat.

"General." Bart's lips thinned into a smug expression, like his old rank carried more weight than Houston's acknowledgement of his paterfamilias. Right smart salute, too, then he sat.

"What can I do you two for?" Like he needed to ask.

"Tell him, Pa. Me being the oldest, he should just bow out graceful-like and leave the way clear for me."

"Not going to happen." Bart glared at Houston.

“Don’t be so sure.”

“I’m fed up with you holding those few months over my head. Been doing it my whole life, too.” He scooted to the edge of his seat and put his hand on the desk. “It’d be downright sick for an uncle to marry his older niece. Tell him. Wouldn’t it? I mean isn’t that like incest?”

“I swan, sonny. You don’t know anything, do you?”

“Tell him, Uncle Henry. He needs to forget about Francy. I got plenty enough to worry about with that rotten Hunter Briggs sniffing around.”

Houston gave back the glare. “You are so lame, Bartholomew Baylor. Francine and I are not any kin. And me being her uncle will only be an amusing story to tell our children someday.”

“It’s just nasty.”

“Ain’t a lick of it even close to incest. Mercy! Right, Pa?”

“That’s enough.”

Both boys sat back in their chairs.

“You two, has there ever been even one young lady that either of you wanted to court that the other didn’t?” He eyed his son first then looked to Bart. “Well? Has there?”

“Uh, well, uh...”

“No, Pa, but now that you mention it...you see...Francy’s...she’s different.”

“How so, Son?”

“For one thing, she’s smart.”

“Yeah, smart enough to see straight through you.” Bart grinned like he’d just rode a tough bronc.

Henry silenced the younger man with a look then turned back to his oldest boy. “I’ll give you that. What else?” He held his hand out, palm facing Bart. “You’ll get a turn, so no interrupting.”

He let both boys extol the young lady’s virtues and obvious good looks then faced his wife. “Anything you want to say?”

“Not me. I’m happy as a June bug taking mental notes for my next novel.”

Houston’s ‘Mama’ trumped Bart’s ‘Auntie’ protest by a hair. Tickled Henry how her mind worked. He turned his attention back to the boys. “Has the young lady said or done anything to make you two think she’s even interested in either of you?”

Neither answered.

“Seems to me your next trip to Llano will give Francy an opportunity.”

“Pa, no. We can’t go. Not now.”

“Yes, you can and will. Both of you agreed and will keep to your word, but I will allow you to stay until after Bonnie’s big shindig next

Saturday. A week from tomorrow, though, you fellows will take that load of lumber to Llano.”

“Sir, how exactly is us going off an opportunity for Francy?” Bart’s pained expression would have been comical if Henry wasn’t so troubled by the situation.

“We’ll see if she misses either of you, or....” He shrugged. “If she picks the Briggs boy or someone else...so be it. But her being here is not going to disrupt my plans or negate your commitment.”

Hopefully, he’d put enough steel in his voice to convince the pair he meant business.

Houston looked to his cousin then stood. “Thank you for letting us stay for the party.”

Bart jumped to his feet. “Yes, sir. Thank you! Uncle, suppose she can go with us?”

“No.”

Houston grinned and he slightly nodded approval at his sidekick. “What if Rebecca goes? Then could Francy come along?”

“Fine. If your sister agrees to chaperone, Francy can go if she wants.” He waved them away. “Now get. It’s past my bedtime.”

Once the door closed, he stood then helped May to her feet. “What do you think?”

“Appears to me Miss Francine is playing her cards close to her vest. This evening seems she went out of her way to pay all three young men the same amount of attention and loved every minute of it.”

He nodded then led the way to their bed. The sheets felt too cool, but bless the Lord, he had his own personal heater.

May snuggled in tight. “Has Rebecca told you about Michael’s latest dream?”

“No.”

“Well, you already know he dreamed Marcus married his mama and that he had a baby sister, right?”

“Yes.”

“Last night he dreamed about her again. Told his mama the baby’s name is Isabell, but he calls her Izzy.”

“Lord, have mercy. Don’t think that’ll be going over too big with Rebecca.”

“Why?”

“That was Wallace’s mother’s name.”



Next afternoon, in the barn’s corral, Houston held the new pony’s

reins, as Rebecca sat Michael onto the leather seat. The boy grabbed the saddle horn then leaned forward like his steed was about to bolt. "Let him go, Uncle."

"You sure, little buddy?"

The boy nodded extra big. "Me ready."

Houston looked to his sister who shrugged then backed toward the railing. "Alright then...easy does it." He released the narrow leather straps then came up beside Rebecca and leaned against boards.

Nothing happened.

The horse didn't move except to swish his tail. Good old boy, exactly as advertised. "Tell him to giddy-up. Shake the reins a little."

The boy obeyed, and the horse walked toward the rail, turned easy, then headed around the corral. "Look at me! Look at me! Giddy up, Frisco!" He glanced over. "Hey, I'm riding."

His mother smiled. "I see. You certainly are! Sit up straight and hold onto your reins."

Houston watched for a bit, satisfied that his nephew could handle the gelding. Especially with the pony within the boundaries of the corral.

He faced his sister. "Well? You thought about it?"

"Some."

"So, you're willing to go?"

"I didn't say that. It's a long trip. Took us almost a month there and back the time Wallace and I went with Levi and Rose."

"We usually make a turnaround in three weeks, but that's the beauty of it. We'll have Francy all to ourselves, unless Briggs gets wind of what we're doing and volunteers to tag along." He kicked the dirt. "Pa'd probably let him, too."

"Maybe I've come up with a better idea."

"Oh, yeah?" Houston didn't like the sound of it, but she grinned a little, wouldn't hurt to hear her out. No need to antagonize his only hope. "How so?"

"It'd only be a day extra, according to Daddy, if we side tracked to Dallas."

"Why would we want to do that?"

"Well, that way, you two Romeos would have our company until that far, then after a day or two of shopping, we could ride the stage back home."

"Sis! That's no good."

She glanced at her son, waved, then faced him. "Best I can do. Mama and Daddy said they'd watch the boys for me for a week, but no more. So...afraid it's either that, or..." She hiked both shoulders. "See you when you get back."

"You and Francy being plotting against us?"

The grin spread wide on her lips. “Why would you ask such a thing?”

“Because this morning, she’s acting like she wasn’t too interested in going, then at dinner she acted all excited about the trip. Just figured you two’d been talking.”

“I did mention a shopping trip. Told her how much I adored a particular haberdashery uptown in Dallas. And there’s this little dress shop that you wouldn’t believe. Two sisters run it, and they order all the latest patterns from New York and Paris. You choose the fabrics and notions, then they custom make....”

Mercy. His ears shut her out while she droned on. Women and the stupid stuff they wanted to talk about! Even though she was his big sister, he really thought of her more like a mother than sibling and loved her beyond measure.

It pleased him she’d even think enough to go out of her way just to give him a few extra days with Francy.

Maybe he and Bart could trim a day or two off the return trip, and with them leaving on a Monday, Francy would only be at church one Sunday without him being there.

Hopefully, nothing would happen between Francy and that interloper Briggs before he could get back. He had half a mind to go tell him how the cow ate the cabbage, but....

Hey! Wonder if he could convince his pa to order Bartholomew to stay in Llano for a while? He grinned at that thought, then movement brought him back to the business at hand. Michael had worked the pony into an easy trot, but seemed to be comfortable enough with it.

“Doing good there, Mic.” For sure and certain, his father was the best horse trader around those parts. Frisco’s silver dappled coat shone in the sun, and he seemed the perfectly mannered mount for Houston’s little greenhorn nephew. “Push a little against your stirrups, and you won’t bounce so much.”

The child took to it immediately.

“It’s called posting, Michael.” His mother looked as if she might burst with pride.



Henry didn’t count the shindig’s cost, but it had to be over the price of a right nice herd of fatlings. At least Jethro Risen hadn’t sent him a bill for his baby’s California wedding. Good man that Jethro.

Shame Bonnie couldn’t have put Jasper off for another year. Henry could have doubled their nuptial celebration with a pounding for the Llano house.

Except then he would have had to pay stage fare for the whole Briggs clan.

He put the financial cogitations away. From the sounds of it, and the guard hairs on Indigo's neck, a new flurry of celebrants were arriving. He held his hand out, fingers up, toward the mutt. "Stay." Without a look back, he hurried out of his library to greet the new round of guests.

Like he figured, half the county eventually showed up at his front door, but then his wife's hostessing abilities proved legendary. She always served copious amounts of excellent food, hired the best musicians in the state for lively music, and offered merriment aplenty.

Who wouldn't want to attend?

Way past his bedtime, he saw off the last guest not spending the night before he retreated to his library.

Michael sat his mama's lap in the far wingback, mesmerized by his grandmother's reading from another one of her pirate books.

How did his love ever think of so many stories? She'd never been a pirate, after all. Henry took the other seat and grinned at his oldest. She smiled then mouthed, "Is he asleep?"

He shook his head.

Reading on for a few minutes, when the little man's eyes finally shut, she slowed each word down then stopped all together. "Put him in our bed."

"You sure?"

"Of course. Let's see how he does, waking up with us."

Though not too keen on the idea, he'd given his word to watch the boys for a week. Didn't realize then that entailed the four-year-old in his bed.

The boy gasped once, then sat up in his mother's lap. "Daddy, come quick! Mama's been...." He looked right at Henry, nodded like everything was fine, then leaned back against his mama. He settled with a long exhale, and his chin dropped to his chest.

"I saw him fussing at you earlier."

"Yes, sir. He didn't like me dancing with anyone but him or you."

Henry glanced at his wife then back to his daughter. "Poor guy. Maybe when that pup I found for him gets weaned, he'll forget about the Major."

"Hopefully."



The new distraction might help her son, but what balm—if one even existed—might soothe Rebecca's soul? She completely

understood the boy dreaming about Marcus.

Hardly a night passed without the Major's coming to call, but those unhappy visits all ended the same—with her running away and him begging her to stay.

Next day, Sunday services were poorly attended. Tickled her some that after the meeting the preacher took her daddy to task for keeping his parishioners out too late. He'd left early before the reception truly got under way.

But that admonishment ended abruptly when the fight broke out.



Rebecca lifted her hem and petticoats off the ground and hurried toward the growing crowd behind the arbor. Her father reached the outer ring first, and the folks parted like the Red Sea just as Hunter's right fist missed Houston's chin but connected squarely with Bart's left eye.

His head flew back, knocking him into the onlookers.

Rose pushed by, mere steps behind Levi. "Bartholomew!"

Grabbing her brother, Daddy pulled him away from the Briggs' boy, whose fists remained up and at the ready, though he'd exercised the good sense not to throw another punch. Levi stood between Briggs and and Bart.

"That's enough." He glared at them both, shaking his head. "Go on. This is over."

Hunter lowered his hands then backed away a step. "Yes, sir. But they started it."

"Liar!" Bart covered his reddening eye while his mother kept trying to move his hand, obviously for a more thorough examination. It already looked awful.

“God’ll get you for bearing false witness, Hunter Briggs!” Houston jerked his arm away from his father’s hold.

His father faced him. “It’s over, Son. Makes no difference who got it going.”

“Yes, sir.”

Rebecca stepped in closer. Bart sat on the grass looking rather self-satisfied, while Francy daubed her hanky at his swelling eye and bloody cheek.

What a mess.

Bad blood and hard feelings no one needed. The two families, already doubled married, couldn’t afford any lasting offenses. She sighed. Why did those three boys all have to have their caps set for the same young lady?

At least only a fist fight had ensued. She met Rose’s eyes and shook her head in unison with her sister-in-law.

Praise God no one produced knives or firearms. Foolish boys!

Guns made her remember the Sunday her daddy got shot right there on the church grounds. She thought he’d been killed. The thought stung her heart anew.

Bless God, the boys’ folly hadn’t come to that.

A heart-to-heart with her niece seemed in order, and the sooner, the better. Francy should pick one of the boys, or none. But her leading on all three had to stop.



If only a good strapping or even a month of KP could solve his problem; Henry knew better though. And as much as he wanted to blame his adopted granddaughter for the whole debacle, she only did what young ladies had been doing forever.

Those boys of his—and the Briggs’ son, too—caused all the trouble.

He leaned back in his chair and looked across his desk at Houston, then Bart. “How’s your eye, Son?” It looked like a swollen, purple and blue muddle, and he couldn’t imagine how the boy could see out of it.

“Hurts some, but I think the poultice Miss Jewel mixed up is helping. Seems to me the swelling’s been going down steady.”

Looked more like steady growing to him, but.... “See good enough to ride?”

“Oh yes, sir. Definitely.”

Houston scooted to the edge of the wingback. “Pa, Hunter started it, truly. All I did was push him back a little, then he –”

A stern look stopped the narrative. He’d heard the whole story

from several reliable witnesses. "I do not need a rehash of the fisticuffs. What I want to know is what was said to set Hunter off?"

"Well. Uh... Pa, he was being an idiot." Houston looked to his cousin. "Wasn't he, Bart?"

"For sure and for certain as mama would say. Yes, sir! He claimed he had the right, but we both said no he did not." He glanced over at his partner. "Didn't we, Houston?"

"Yes, sir. We was standing together against it, me and Bart. Then Hunter got all mad."

Henry wanted to laugh, but kept his face like flint. The two had been doing it to him their whole lives, dodging and weaving whenever they got into a scrape.

Might be mortal enemies when just the two of them, but throw in a third and they became best partners. "Had a right to do what?"

"Come with us to Dallas! Can you believe it?"

"Yeah, the nerve. Who does he think he is?"

"He said Rebecca and Francy needed an escort on their ride back since we was going on to Llano. Claimed it wouldn't be safe for them."

"But we told him he was full of it, and he couldn't ride along with us."

"On account of how he wasn't welcome." Houston leaned back like his final statement settled everything—as though he and his cousin hadn't done anything...completely innocent of wrong doing.

"Yes, sir. That's when that dumb buttinsky bowed up to Houston. I was just standing there, minding my own business. Next thing I know, I'm seeing stars, and Francy is doctoring my eye. That part was wonderful, by the way." He glared at his cohort. "Sure seems to me that she's made her choice."

"Oh, you've got bats in the belfry, young Bartholomew. Don't go showing off your ignorance now." He met his father's eyes. "She hasn't done nothing of the sorts. Francy was just being kind and neighborly. Tell him that don't mean a thing."

"Mercy, you two. I ought to not let her go at all, but she didn't do anything wrong. And if Hunter wants to go, it's a free country, boys. And if he or anyone else wants to share your camp or company along the way—so long as they remain peaceful—you will keep your good manners and welcome them."

"Pa, does he have to?"

"I told his grandmother if he wants to, he could. And you two better not cause any trouble." He kept Houston's gaze until the boy looked away.

"Yes, sir. But just like at the church...we can't be held responsible if he starts something."

"Guess you could stay here. That what I need to do for there to be

peace?"

"No, sir. Not at all, sir."

He turned his attention to Bart.

"Yes, sir. We'll keep the peace best we can, Uncle. Right, Houston?"

"Right."



Just above the men's heads, in the upstairs bedroom Rebecca's littlest sister Charlotte had so graciously surrendered, another confab was underway.

As with most of their gatherings, ladies preferred to beating around the dogwood...then the cedar tree that guarded it...and so on. Mother May carried the conversation with direct questions whenever anyone took too long of a breath.

Finally, she must have figured there had been enough small talk and shot Rebecca the go ahead. She set her tea cup in its matching saucer and faced Francy. "Should we read anything into you fussing over Bart so much this afternoon?"

The corners of the young lady's mouth turned downward, and she pouted her bottom lip as if pleading ignorance, but her eyes spoke louder. Hard to tell, though, if true love lingered there or something else.

"You see...I do really like Bart. It certainly wasn't as if he asked to be slugged. Certainly not on my account." The fingers of one hand splayed across her chest.

"That doesn't answer my question. You came to meet the Briggs' son... Are you leaning toward him then?"

She grinned. "Well, I can't rightly say. Hunter certainly acted the fool, didn't he? Wouldn't you agree that he's a bit of a hothead? I mean, I don't know if he'd be a good match. What do you think?"

"Was he? I know Daddy never took kindly to anyone putting their hands on him, and all the reports are that Houston shoved him." Why ever was she defending Mister Briggs?

With a tilt of her head, Francy looked into the corner of the ceiling then nodded.

"Maybe so, but only after Hunter pushed him first. Besides, your brother was only protecting what he counts his. Not that I am, mind you. But well, he acts like it. He acts like the king of the castle and that no one should be challenging him. I kind of like that. Anyway, what do you two think?"

Shrugging, Rebecca looked to her stepmother.

“You’re the one who needs to decide, Francy. From what I understand, you came looking for a match. You need to decide who suits you best before someone gets hurt—or worse.”

“Oh my. It could never come to that! Could it? Do you really think _”

“It makes no difference what Mama thinks—or me either. You need to decide, Francy!”

“I agree anything like that would be terrible. We’re all kin either by blood or marriage, and no one needs this.” Francy stood and moved toward the window, looking out when she got there. “It will be good to get away for a few days. Shopping might help me take my mind off the three of them for a while.”

“Well, hopefully, you can at least whittle the number down to one during this trip. If you can’t pick a beau yet, you can at least tell one of them to stop coming around.”



Francy didn’t know if she could agree. She’d never enjoyed three men fighting over her before. Not that she considered herself a prize to be won, but evidently, the men did. And to be honest...it’d been more than a little thrilling.

Poor Bart. From where she stood, while the other two flashed hot, it seemed to her, he tried to be the voice of reason. She could talk with him for hours and loved that about him.

She looked first at her aunt then to the only grandmother she’d ever known. “I don’t know if that’ll work.”

“Why not, sweetheart?”

“Well, it’s like Bart and Houston are joined at the hip. Hunter is older and rather handsome, but if I was to narrow it down to, say him and one of my cousins-by-adoption...except Houston is really my uncle.”

“Technically, but....”

“Bart teases me that it would be incest if I chose to marry an uncle.” She grinned. “He also says him being half-Comanche should seal the deal.”

Her grandmother chuckled. “How does he figure that makes a difference?”

“Because he says the People know how to treat a woman.”

Auntie shook her head and rolled her eyes. “You do know that he’s never lived with the People to know how the braves treat anyone. Right?”

“Yes, but Charley did, and Bart says his big brother told him all

about it.”

“Hasn’t Houston heard the same stories?”

“Probably. I guess anyway. But Bart says him being a paleface...it doesn’t count. It wouldn’t really be incest, would it? Me and Houston.”

“No, of course not. If your heart is telling you to choose Houston, there’s not a reason in the world the fact he’s your adopted mother’s little brother should stop you.”

“Good, that’s what he’s been saying, but I’ve been afraid of asking.” Francy exhaled. She’d hate to cut Houston out of the running. He was so manly and strong and confident. “It’s so hard.”

“I know it is, but a choice needs to be made. Pray about it, Francy.”

“That’s true. Still, each one of them has so many wonderful qualities I truly love. Seems to me like any of the three would make a wonderful husband. How can I choose and break someone’s heart? Or two someones?”

“Well, here’s what we’ll do. If you cannot choose by the time the boys get home after our trip to Dallas, I’m thinking it may be best for you to go back home. Absence makes the heart grow fonder is what the poets say. Maybe once there, you’ll know more clearly whom your heart is missing the most.”

She liked that idea, but what in the world would she do if two of them came chasing after her?



So much had changed in Ford’s life, even to the city of his birth. Once he’d loved the town. After the deaths of his wife and baby girl though, he’d sworn never to return. Yet there New Orleans stood again.

Half a mile or so from the city’s wharf, the steamer’s big wheel slowed, came to a complete stop, then reversed itself.

Remaining at the railing, he watched the crew and longshoremen secure the ship.

The smells of rotting fish and man sweat mingled with the too-sweet and too-heavy fragrance of a lady upwind. Horns, hollering, and a howling dog joined the noises of the city, exaggerating his disdain of the place.

Not the New Orleans of his boyhood anymore. That was for sure.

Soon as they dropped the gangplank, he retreated to his room and gathered his things, taking extra care with his latest canvas. Once back on dry ground, he headed toward the ticket office.

Though he appreciated first class plenty, his dwindling purse

demanded steerage. He followed the signs along a row of warehouses.

At the end of one building, he spotted the line and took a place at the end—apparently not the only new arrival who needed to get upriver. He set his grips down and leaned the bundle of canvases against them.

A young woman of color with two small children stood a ways beyond the door. The lady balanced the smallest child on her hip, while the bigger one clung to her skirt.

That she was lost was Ford's first impression, but on reflection, desperate seemed more appropriate.

HELP THEM

What?

He looked behind—only to confirm what he knew full well. No one there—then to the man in front of him. But that guy appeared engrossed with reading his newspaper.

Who'd said it then?

HELP THEM MARCUS

The thought of helping the little family warmed Ford's heart, even more, hearing what had to be the Lord's small still voice. Exactly like Jethro Risen said when explaining how he knew where to find Marcus, wading in his swamp of self-pity.

Shame it had taken all his coin, but then how could he not be obedient?



Three wagons left out Monday morning before sunrise with a total of four freemen plus the three mounted beaus who couldn't keep their eyes off Francy and Auntie—all just to guard her honor. She loved it mostly, but would hate it all to blue blazes if someone got hurt. If looks could kill, all three suitors would be dead, and it wasn't even

dinner yet.

According to Houston, who acted the boss, though everyone—even Hunter Briggs—had acknowledged Rebecca’s word as law, announced that in another hour, they’d stop for two hours for dinner and to rest the mules.

The padded bench they’d rigged up for her and Auntie in the extra wagon proved comfortable enough, not too hard or bouncy.

If she’d her druthers, she’d be riding horseback with the boys, but then actually, she’d only ridden a few times—and that in the safety of the corral behind the barn.

That hour, Hunter rode on her right beside the wagon with Houston on the left and Bart riding drag. Auntie’s idea worked well so far. Only when they changed places for the next hour did any opportunity for mayhem arise.

But as her grandfather had reminded them all, they were God-fearing men related by marriage twice over. ‘So behave!’ he’d charged.

Francy grabbed the leather strap holding the side canvas up then nodded toward the one on her aunt’s side. “How about a bit of privacy?”

“Fine with me.” Rebecca pulled hers as did Francy.

“May I ask a personal question, Aunt Rebecca?”

“Ask away, but I might not answer.”

“Understood. Mama and all the aunties told me you had like a hundred or more suitors before you agreed to marry Uncle Wallace. They all said they always figured you settled for him...married him just because he wore you down. Is that true?”



Rebecca nodded. “More like twenty-five, if you only count the ones whom Daddy let come back. And with Wallace, no. I didn’t settle.”

Was that a lie?

Did she even know?

The girl eyed her hard, but didn’t challenge her statement. “I loved my husband, still do.” She allowed herself a smile. It had never been an issue until after he’d killed himself being so stubborn. She’d never even considered it, and couldn’t imagine why all her sisters had obviously been speculating.

Were they right?

“I let Wallace talk me into tagging along with him, Levi, and Rose on this very same trip. That’s when I realized that I loved Mister Rusk. I never would have agreed to be married if I didn’t. It wouldn’t have

been fair to him.” She stared out the front opening. “On that trip is when, according to him, I accepted his one hundred forty-fourth proposal.”

“That many, huh. He was persistent. That’s what all the aunties said.” Francy shook her head.

“He tickled me so. I had it at like ten times, but he always could spin a good yarn. Silly man claimed if he’d gotten to one hundred and fifty even, he was going to consider maybe I wasn’t interested.”

“So then you didn’t settle. You really loved him. I’m glad for that. Mama says you’d set your standards too high because of loving Grandpa so much.”

“Mercy! My sister sure has a big mouth. But she’s at least partially right. I’ve definitely loved Henry Buckmeyer from like...maybe the first day I laid eyes on him. I swear I knew the very next one that I wanted him to be my daddy. That he was the one I’d been praying for.”

“I love that story.”

“And yes, I’ve never known another man I’ve held in higher regard. But....”

Where did Marcus Ford fit into all this ruminating?

“But what?”

“Oh, I just thought this trip was about you and the boys.”

“Yes. I suppose so, but I’m truly in need of advice. Help in deciding who or what I should do seems quite essential. I mean...I really don’t want to go back to California, not yet.”

“Because...?”

“Except....” She grinned and looked up coyly from her heavy dark lashes. “Wouldn’t it be so romantic if one of them came to fetch me like Jasper did Bonnie? But then what if the wrong one came?”

The girl acted so dramatic that Rebecca had to bite her tongue to keep from laughing. Instead, she played along with her. “That would be tragic.”

“I know! Whatever would I do then? And...” The girl gasped. “Well, you know about Mama and....”

Not exactly sure what the girl alluded to, Rebecca wanted to hear it all. “Yes.”

“Well, bless her heart. I’m certain she thought she was in love....” Francy looked toward the front. The freedman driving wasn’t paying any attention; she shielded her mouth with a cupped hand anyway. “Just because she was expecting, she agreed to marry Daddy. I don’t ever want to settle for any man.”

“But your mother didn’t.”

“Oh, I know. On the ship coming to Texas to get Grandpa’s blessing, I kept throwing them together alone until she came to love

Daddy and not that horrible Clinton.”

Who was Clinton? Dare she ask?

No! It was none of her business.

But that certainly would explain where Becca got her curly dark hair. Sure wasn't from Mary Rachel or Jethro...or any other relative for that matter. Mercy, why had her sister lied?

For sure and certain then, Rebecca wanted to know the whole story, but how could she ask without exposing her indecent motives?

And...she'd be playing on Francy's innocence, causing her to be almost traitorous.

Did her little namesake know who her real father was?

“I mean...if you loved your husband all that much, how could you be in love with Marcus now? I know Mama thought she loved Clinton, but she really didn't. And at first, she said she almost hated Daddy—on account that he wouldn't sell her his share of the Mercantile—but I knew they were perfect for each other.”

“And you were so right.”

“So why can't I tell who's right for me? And what if I pick wrong?” Francy scrunched her shoulders. “Anyway. I'm glad you say you loved Wallace. Do you love Marcus, too? Or is it...”

Rebecca breathed a bit too hard out of her nose, not quite a snort, but less ladylike than she would have preferred. “Good question. I've asked myself the same thing more than once.”

Like she would ever tell the little flap-mouth anything she didn't want repeated. “And...well...someday when I see my husband again, I'll try to explain my actions, but so far—other than that one kiss—I've done nothing dishonorable.”

“You. Kissed. Marcus! When? When did that happen?”

Mercy. She knew better then went right ahead and spilled her guts.

An even harder breath came out her nose, but then she'd clamped her lips shut. Seemed her mouth was too big for her own good. “Well, not that it's any of your business, but when he showed up unexpectedly at the orphanage.”

“Really?”

“Yes, you see...uh...well, I sort of threw myself at him before I even realized what I was doing. The instant I did, I pushed away. It was only a few seconds...not even that.” She shook her head. “I apologized, and it never happened again, and it never will happen again now because I'm not marrying him or anyone else.”

“Really? Why not? You shouldn't have to be lonely.”

“No, I won't. I've got my boys. Besides, I refuse to marry anyone who isn't a believer. I've only been a widow less than two years, too. It would be scandalous to marry anyone so soon.” Her list was longer,

but she couldn't remember exactly what was on it. All that talk about Marcus only served to make her heartsick.

"I don't know, Auntie. Two years is a long time, and you're not getting any younger."

Why the little twit. But truth was still truth. No doubt that in Rebecca's heart, she longed to have Marcus Ford in her life...forever. But she had to stay strong and not do anything as stupid as chasing after the man.

"Would you marry him if he was a Christian?"

"He hates God. Blames Him for the deaths of his wife and baby girl. So it's really a moot point. And one of mercy, too, sweetheart. If you could have seen the look on his face when I told him I couldn't marry him...."

The thought of that pain and the depth of the hurt in his eyes stabbed her, and she found herself lost in it for too long. She shook the macabre webs from her head.

"But if..."

"He'll never ask again." Rebecca filled her lungs. Life was so unfair. Her lie rose up and nicked her soul. She exhaled then leaned in close. "A while ago... I may have somewhat... uh...misled you."

STOP DO NOT COMPOUND THE LIE

"Oh, Francy, you see, I flat out lied...about knowing about Becca's real daddy. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me for tricking you into breaking your mother's confidence."

"Oh, she didn't tell me." The girl grinned. "Mama and Daddy don't even know I know, and you mustn't ever tell them either. After I got older, it wasn't too hard to figure out what had happened. I mean, after all, my brother and I lived through the whole story. I felt so sorry for her. Made me love her even more. She's pretty perfect, you know."

As much as Rebecca wanted to ask about the Clinton guy, she restrained herself. Hopefully, her niece would volunteer more details. But then instead of elaborating, the young lady turned pensive.

After a bit, she shrugged. "I've wrestled with telling Becca. Not now, but later...when she's older. I don't think Mama or Daddy ever will. What do you think?"

"Bart and Lacey Rose have both known all along about their fathers. Of course, that they're half-Comanche would be rather hard to hide due to their looks. Besides, for better or worse, it's a part of their heritage."

"So you think Becca should know that Clinton man is her father by blood?"

"I can't say. And I'm glad it isn't my call. I do agree wholeheartedly that now is not the time, but maybe...when she's grown. I do think she should hear it from her mother though."



“That’s what I figured, but...” The wagon seemed to be slowing. Francy swung around. Bart had disappeared. She lifted the side canvas. So had the other riders. “Seems we’re stopping for dinner.”

“What was that ‘but’ about?”

“Oh, Clinton is all. He has a son now. I don’t know his age, but he’s between me and my sisters.”

“I can see where that might complicate things, but your mother would never let any such a thing happen.”

“Umm hmmm. If she knew about it.”

The wagon came to a complete stop.

Her aunt climbed out. “Come on. Let’s see if we can help.”

Older women were always so ready to jump in and help do the work wherever they were, and Francy liked it. Their willingness usually allowed her time to slip off to more interesting endeavors.

But in the circumstances of the trip, she couldn’t very well avoid the chores, so she climbed down behind her aunt and went along. Still, she’d much rather sit back and let the men do the cooking and cleaning.

Kind of hard to see who was making eyes when a body stayed too busy. But Auntie had promised some alone-time with each young man...properly supervised, of course. Though out of earshot.

Fatback, fried potatoes and a cup of black coffee—nothing compared to the dinner spread Miss Jewel put on—but she hadn’t agreed to come along to see to their meals. And Francy couldn’t see Grandpa allowing such a thing anyway.

He loved her cooking too much. So did everyone.

Auntie set her cup down on the folding table then leaned back and smiled at Mister Briggs. “Hunter, you’re the oldest. You may take the first twenty minutes.”

The man jumped to his feet, tipped his hat, then extended his hand. Francy let him help her to her feet then slipped her hand over his extended forearm. She liked men with manners, but....

Once seated in the two chairs directly in line with the campsite, yet deemed to be out of everyone’s earshot, she looked him straight in the eye.

“Are you a hothead, Hunter Briggs?”

He tossed his hair a bit to the side away then lifted his off shoulder. “I’ve got a temper alright. But who doesn’t? I wouldn’t call myself a hothead though. What about you? You get mad very often?”

Ah, playing her own game. She liked that, him throwing the same

question back. "Who me?" Playfully, she gave him a big grin then turned serious. "The incident yesterday at church, I'd place the most blame on you for Bart getting slugged. You seemed like a hotheaded bully."

"But I wasn't trying to hit Baylor. Buckmeyer put his hand on me, and I don't abide that."

"But you did it first! Do you think he should abide what you don't? And what about me? If I was to put my hand on you, would you smack me?"

"Of course not! No! I've never hit a woman and never would. No matter what she did." He stared right into her eyes without a flinch and didn't look away.

She didn't either. In the ensuing silence, she searched his soul a bit until he abruptly looked away, as though she might see something there he didn't want seen. "Are you hiding something from me, Hunter Briggs?"



Bart just thought he hated Hunter Briggs sparking Francy! But his once-upon-a-time partner sitting there making nice with his love... well...it was beyond the pale. He tore his eyes away from the happy couple.

"It just is not right, Auntie." Even before she agreed, he had to look again. What were they saying anyway?

"Why's that, sugar?"

"Houston is her uncle. No matter what anyone says, there no exception in the law for incest."

"I don't know about the law, but you know there's not one drop of blood relation with Francy being adopted."

"I know that, but it makes her Aunt Mary Rachel's legal daughter, don't it? I mean, so legally, she's –"

"If need be, Bartholomew, Mary Rachel and Jethro could disown her. They could go before a judge make it all legal, were their daughter to choose Houston."

Sure didn't like the sound of that. He turned toward his aunt again. "You're funning me, right?"

"Maybe, a little. But you must admit, incest is a weak argument. I'd drop it if I was you."

"Why? It's all I've got to hang my hat on."

"Bartholomew Baylor! Don't sell yourself short. I'd say you're riding the inside track. She said herself how easy you are to talk to, how much she enjoys your conversations. And we all saw how she made over you when Hunter bloodied your eye."

"True." He glanced their direction. At least she kept a respectable distance from the trespasser. Good. "She really said that? Liking to

talk with me?"

"She did. Told me and Mama yesterday evening."

"Hmmm. She say anything else I might want to know?"

"Now, you wouldn't want me relaying all of our private women-talk, would you?"

"Oh no, ma'am. But this is different. I mean if it involves me. Or that rotten Houston! How much time does he have left anyway?"

"Another sixteen minutes. How's it different?"

"Easy. There's only one of her, but there's three of us. I need help, Auntie. All the help I can get. I'm about to lose my mind over that woman. I love her."

"Love's a strong word. You sure it's the real thing?"

He forced himself to face his aunt. "Yes, ma'am. I'm sure and certain. Lacy Rose held a special place in my heart, but what's there for Francy is...."

"Is what?"

He shrugged. "I can hardly explain it. The pain, the thought of losing her, hurts so bad. Especially to Houston. You know he only wants her because I do." He had to look back. "How much time now?"



Rebecca couldn't stop herself from smiling. "One minute less than the last time you asked."

"Oh. You do know it only takes one to hang a jury."

"Yes, I've heard that before, but don't even think such a thing, much less speak it. You love Houston as much as any of your brothers, and you've been going to the same church with Hunter Briggs your whole life."

"I know."

"Well, what kind of testimony would that be? You killing either one of them?"

"Or both." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Oh, Auntie, what am I going to do if she doesn't pick me?"

"You been praying about it?"

"Yes, ma'am. Every night and all day long."

"Have you told her your heart?"

"Uh, well...not really, uh...you think I should?"

"When your Uncle Wallace was courting me..." Her husband's face flashed before her inner eye, and she had to grin at the sweet remembrance. "He told me first off how how he had been in love with me for years, just from hearing your daddy talk about me and him sharing my letters. Then when he finally got to meet me..." She

chuckled.

“What’d he say?”

“The big lug never let an opportunity pass that he didn’t tell me how much and true he loved me.” For a few dear heartbeats, she wallowed in that love, but then the photograph in her mind of him dying in her daddy’s bed of stubbornness and pride overshadowed her soul.

If only he’d let the doctor have his leg, she would never have been on that stage alone and met Marcus Ford.

“Stupid war.”

The boy’s words eased her back into the moment. But Wallace Rusk kept his rotting leg and passed. “Yes, it was. Over half a million dead and countless more wounded. They should have outlawed slavery back when England did, but the hotheads wouldn’t have it.”

Finally, Houston’s time came to an end. Shame she couldn’t read lips. She’d love to hear the exchanges between her niece and beaus; by the same token, she certainly wouldn’t want hers and Marcus’ private conversations made public.

Why did it always have to come back around to Ford?

Silly question. In her heart of hearts, she knew exactly why. A part of her longed to see him again and missed him beyond measure. She longed to inquire of his health and condition of his soul.

Lord knew the man refusing God’s love shattered her well-being. But...time supposedly healed all wounds. Still, how long a time?

Hopefully, one day in the near future, she could at last put the Major behind her and concentrate on her sons and the fullness of her life with them. Not that she expected for one minute to forget Marcus Aurelius Ford completely...if she even could.

No, she would pray for his salvation until her dying breath. Just the thought of him missing Heaven....

Besides, her day in the sun had come, been bright, and set.

Wallace had made his choice, and she had made hers.

Worst of all, Marcus had made his...whether she wanted to accept it or not. But God... Nothing was too difficult for Him. Why, He could even....

Putting all that away, she focused on her charges. Bart talked and Francy listened intently. She sure looked enthralled. Or was that just playing nice?

That evening after supper, Rebecca gave the young ones another round, but to her surprise, Hunter—last that time—cut his sparking short. She held her inquisitive mind at bay until alone with her niece in the supply wagon, preparing for bed.

Without being asked, the boys had converted the space from sitting to sleeping.

What wouldn't those young men do for the chance at love?

"You and Mister Briggs have a disagreement?"

"No, ma'am, not truly." Francy slipped under the covers on her side of the overstuffed pallet. "But we did come to an understanding."

Rebecca trimmed the oil lamp, noted its location and the ready supply of matches, then joined her niece. She loved getting prone at the end of a long day. "So have you decided on Hunter then?"

"Oh no, ma'am. Just the opposite as a matter of fact. You see, he's in love with another. Only came calling because his grandmother's dead set against the young lady. He'd promised Jasper and Bonnie that he'd meet me.

Then after the dustup with Houston...well, I knew something wasn't right. Saw it first thing, and..."

"And what?"

"Oh, he was nice enough, but..."

"Have you decided then?"

"Maybe. It's so hard to be certain. Still, I'd rather not say anything just yet. We've got four more days, and I'm rather enjoying myself. I've never been the belle of the ball. Hmm, never even been to one at all, actually. I've read about them though."

"Never been to a ball? Why not? Jethro and Mary should have been having at least one a season! That house of theirs is built for it! And...oh." Her and her big mouth. How could they host a party and not invite Clintons?

For the longest, Francy didn't say anything then whispered like she'd read Rebecca's mind. "That's what we always figured. And Daddy...well...he's not much for partying."

For the next few minutes, Rebecca chatted up Bonnie's wedding bash with the young lady, then Francy confirmed a rumor she'd heard about her sister and brother-in-law's wealth with an even softer voice.

"It's not the money stopping them. Daddy and Uncle Moses have over fifty wooden kegs of gold nuggets stored downtown in the bank's vault. He's taken me with him several times when they had a new one to add."

The girl chuckled. "You should see how those folks at that bank fall all over themselves when we come around."

"Why don't they store them at the Miner's? After all, he and Moses own that one."

"Vault isn't big enough, and from time to time, Daddy needs short term loans, and he uses the nuggets as collateral."

And she thought her sisters were catches. Apparently Francy, Susie, and Becca were just as well-endowed. The young lady talked some more then stopped midsentence and started making cute little snoring sounds.

While Rebecca waited for sleep to find her, she debated whom she thought Francy should pick between Houston and Bart. If either. The age difference really didn't matter, and both boys had plenty of their own land, cattle, and timber.

Not to mention coin aplenty. But better than that, fathers who would never let them rest on any laurels.



Her husband slipped out of bed just as the big clock struck half past four. May snuggled in tight to Michael. She loved it that Henry would let her sleep the sun up. Ten winks later—or forty—the bedroom door eased shut.

The four-year-old put his hand on her cheek. "Where Papa going?"

"To check on things."

"Do Indie go with him?"

"Yes."

The little man snuggled in tight. "Me needs you write me a letter." Then like only the young, his breathing evened out again in half a shake.

She contemplated the why and to whom until she managed to find a doze. Would she sleep sound again until Rebecca returned?

Same hand...same cheek, but that time, Michael sat on her chest. "Want me to fetch a paper and your feather?"

She grabbed him, rolled him over, then kissed his neck. "Your mama told me about how you wake her up." She nodded toward the water closet. "Take care of business then give me some girly time."

"Me already been. Want me go see Miss Jewel and Uncle Chester?"

"Please and thank you." She held the covers, and he scrambled off the bed. "And Michael, I've already been."

A grin spread across his face and his eyes twinkled. "No, you not. You didn't even get up yet."

Shaking her head, she laughed. "Nevermind little man. Skedaddle, please."

"Yes, ma'am, Mawmaw."

After changing the baby then getting him to the table for his bowl of gruel, she heard Michael in the kitchen. She missed exactly what he said, but the little cutie had Jewel laughing, too.

What a bright and happy child! The sprite allowed her a cup of coffee before insisting she write his letter.

Her curiosity definitely peaked, but she still would have preferred Henry to be present, too.

Pointing the boy to the far wingback, she sat her husband's desk, except truth be told, it was more hers now than his. Paper and ink in place, she held her feather out and up. "Alright, sweetheart. I'm ready. Now who is this letter to?"

He scooted to the chair's edge, held his little shoulders back, and nodded a couple of times. "My uncle!"

"Which uncle, man plant? You have several."

His face puckered and he rolled his eyes as if to say 'you know.' "Tell him Izzy and my daddy am stuck in the quarter. Help them like you helped me and Gabe when we got stuck. Thanks, Michael. And Gabe, too, except he don't understand nothing. Not yet." The boy looked at her. "Got it?"

"Yes, sir. Are you talking about your Uncle Jethro?"

He nodded. "Boaz—him's my cousin now. Aunt Mary Rachel told me that. Him says don't never call him Jet on account Uncle don't like it one bit."

"I didn't know that, but neither did I even call him that. So when were you and Gabriel stuck? I haven't heard that story."

"Oh..." He studied her for five or maybe fifty ticks of the big clock. "When Big Mama wouldn't stay dead. But Uncle comed and got us out of her water closet."

"Came. Your uncle came."

"Yes, he did." Extending his little head toward her just a bit, he squinted. Were those tears causing his eyes to glisten? "Her was gone off the bed. No more blood. Or knife either. She's dead now and gone forever. She not coming back either, and..." He filled his lungs then turned toward the window. "Hey! There's Papa and Indigo! They're come back!"

Her own tears welled. May wanted to run around the desk and hug her grandson, but instead, she remained composed and managed to find her voice. "You best go see. Then hurry back, so you can sign your letter."

Soon her beloved, with the boy riding his shoulders, ducked under the transom. "Michael says his daddy and baby sister are stuck in the quarter."

"Oh, Papa, we're so glad you're home! We've got a letter all written to Uncle Jethro. Michael wanted to ask him for help."

In one easy motion, her husband swung his grandson down then sat the far wingback with the boy on his lap. "Sounds like we need to pray for the Major?"

The boy's face brightened. "Yes! Him and Izzy, too! And Mama needs to hurry up and get back here before Daddy comes."



Ford didn't raise up to see who belonged to the approaching footfalls. Perhaps the Lord had sent the angel of death to carry him home. He'd have his answer then.

But so far, the only thing he'd heard proved to be a deafening silence. For sure and certain—as all the sisters were want to say—he'd heard the Lord tell him to help that family, but now he couldn't find work of any type.

So there he sat, staring at his wife's and baby girl's mausoleum.

If he had two pennies to rub together, he'd purchase a real fleece to put out. He'd read about Saul calling up the prophet, but so far, he'd not asked, and he'd not seen any ghost or spirit or whatever it was Jethro claimed to have seen.

"Major? That you, sir?"

Ford sat straighter then faced the intruder, searching his memory, then placing the man. "Sergeant Moore." He stood and extended his hand. "Good to see you. How's it been going for you?"

The man offered a firm grasp then an extra pump or two. "Never better, sir. I was about to head on back home when I got this strange feeling in my gut. You ever get the knowing, sir?"

"No. Can't say I have."

"Well, that's what I got. And oh man, you're probably going to think I've lost it, but here. I need to give you these darlings." He stuck his hand in his britches' pocket and pulled out two double eagles.

Ford backed a step. "Sarge. I can't take your money. That's like...a month of wages."

The man grinned. "Better, but the Lord blessed me beyond measure, and this here is a free will offering." He drew near, took Ford's right hand with his off, and turned the coins into his palm. "Take this money, and do with it as you will. It's yours, sir. And you can't not take it. You'd be robbing me of a blessing, to be sure."

Tears welled. He sniffed once. Mercy. Was he about to blubber right there in front of the sergeant? He choked back a sob then managed a whisper. "Bless you. And thank you."

Moore's eyes misted some, too. His grin widened. "The day I left for the war, I turned out three sows and a boar in the bottoms. Earlier today, I sold over a hundred head at two dollars each."

"That's great."

"No telling how many more I've still got. So, yes. The good Lord has blessed me. And you're most welcome, sir. It's good to be a blessing."



If looks could kill, Rebecca realized her brother would be a goner. Shame those two were letting a girl come between them. But on the bright side, surely it would all be over soon.

What an idiot she'd been, agreeing to chaperone the trip. She could live forever without a new hat or dress to have missed all the drama.

Houston eased himself down next to the fire with a good view of Bart and Franci. For a bit, he stared at the couple as they talked then faced her. "Two questions, Sis."

"Ask away, but no promises that I have any answers."

"First off, did Hunter say why he went back?"

"Not to me, but I think Franci knows. They exchanged words right before he took off."

"Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

"Why no, Brother." What brought that on? Why was the big galoot trying to butter her up?

"Well, I do. I was thinking on it earlier. You were more mother than sister until Mama came along, and please don't tell the others, but you're my favorite sister."

So much like his father—who had nothing but favorites. Each and every one of his children knew for sure and for certain they were his favorite.

"That's nice to know, Brother. I love you, too, of course. You're my only full-blood brother, you know. What's your second question?"

"Do you think it's true love?"



Assuming her brother spoke of his emotions toward the object of everyone's affections, she didn't know how to respond. How could she know another's heart? Rebecca shook her head. "I don't know, Houston. Only you can answer that question."

"No, not me." He threw his chin toward Bart and Francy. "Them."

"I don't know about them either. It's a hard question. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I like her fine. She's a lot of fun and all. Real easy to talk to and cuter than a new calf, but I can't rightly know if I want to marry her. Or anyone right now."

"Understandable."

"Now, Bart. He seems to think she's absolutely the one for him. How can he know that? I'm not so sure about that either. I mean..." He glanced at the couple then back. "How does anyone know? Especially with her being so coy about what she's thinking. It seems real confusing, and I'd hate for him to make the wrong decision."

"So would I, but we'll be heading back soon, and you two will have better than three weeks to think things over."

"True."

That night after she got all her charges bedded, she asked herself the same question. Was she in love with Marcus Ford, or had it just been an infatuation?

How did anyone know, indeed! Her brother's question rang so true. Her heart screamed love, but the Lord knew best, and His Word proved plain and simple.

Do not unequally yoke yourself. No exceptions.

Finally Greenville came into view. After offloading their bags at the hotel, the wagons rolled to a stop at the stables in Greenville

where the boys swapped mules and took on more supplies.

Her father's logistical talents amazed Rebecca. Always had.

If only he could devise a strategy to heal her broken heart.

Contrary to what the poet claimed, the parting only brought sorrow—no sweetness at all. Poor Bart's pain was so obvious.

Sensing her brother a bit relieved...maybe tinged with regret, she loved knowing Houston's heart. Then again, he seemed as confused over the whole issue as she. Love. What a peculiar emotion.

Once all the goodbyes got said and handshakes exchanged, Bart pleaded with his eyes for more from Francy. His pitiful glances would have tickled her if the young man wasn't so grief stricken.

But eventually, the wagons with the boys riding alongside disappeared down Main Street. Rebecca took Francy to the dress shop.

Gawking at the new arrivals and getting fitted for their selections provided a nice distraction, but her niece appeared too preoccupied to really enjoy herself.

The seamstress noted the last measurement, double checked the order, then smiled. "Clarksville, isn't that correct?"

"Yes, ma'am. How long would you anticipate for them to be delivered?"

"Oh, three days at the most."

"Excellent." Rebecca paid the bill, a bit more than anticipated, but then Francy had never asked for any wages at all. "Fancy a spot of tea?" She resisted the accent Wallace always used framing the same question.



Before Francy could answer, a sorrel blur flashed across the shops front window then slid to a stop, raising a huge cloud of dust. She hurried to the door and flung it open. "Bart! What are you doing here?"

He swung out of the saddle, took off his hat and grinned. "I couldn't leave. I just couldn't...not without asking."

He climbed the steps, got within inches of her, and his mirth vanished as he sucked a breath then blurted it out.

"I love you, Francine, with my whole heart and everything in me. I know you're the one, and I want to make it official before I go off to Llano! Will you marry me, Francy? Please say you will."

She clamped her lips shut to keep the yes from escaping. "I'll be gone back to California before you get back. But if you were to come to San Francisco, and my father proved agreeable enough to give you his blessing... Well then, Mister Baylor...."

In all her days, she'd never wanted anything as she wanted to throw herself into Bart's arms and smother him with kisses for asking for her hand in marriage, but instead, she held her hands out.

He took them.

"If Daddy agrees, then yes! I'll marry you."

He tugged, and her resolve vanished. She kissed him right there on the main street of Greenville, Texas. He kissed her back, then she remembered herself and pushed away. "Don't you have a load of lumber to see to?"

The smile about split his face right into two. "I love you, Francine Myrtle Risen."

Even him using her middle name couldn't spoil the moment. "I love you, too, Bartholomew Baylor, but neither negates your responsibilities."

"True. Just wait for me, and we'll go back together."

"No, sir. Without a fitting chaperone, that just wouldn't be proper. You take care of your business, then come on out to see me."

He backed away a step, acted like he was going to kiss her again for a few beats of her heart, then put his hat back on, swung into the saddle, and reined his horse around.

With one last glance over his shoulder, he spurred his mount into a gallop as though he had to get away as fast as possible. As if he'd not be able to ever leave if he didn't get away fast.

She loved it and loved him. She'd known for a while but wanted him to be the first to say it. Facing her aunt, she batted her lashes. "Think we could find some champagne instead of tea?"



The poet was right after all. While her niece's sweetness overshadowed her sorrow, it also rubbed salt on Rebecca's heart-wounds. Would new love always remind her of Marcus?

And worse, what would Wallace think of her longings? She had plenty to answer for already. Praise the Lord she'd hadn't compounded her mistakes with Ford.

At least, only one kiss tarnished the fourteen-year marriage. Well, and a lot of longings...way too many for certain.

As though her heart cared not one whit for any of her good intentions, it ignored all her decisions—every one—to forget the man and leapt at every opportunity to relish some meaningless memory.

But the stay in Greenville turned festive. Rebecca put her musings away and caught some of Francy's good cheer.

Nothing like a new hat and clutch to brighten any day; not to

mention all the presents she'd found for everyone. She loved giving gifts and needed no birthday or any other holiday to pass them out.

The ride home promised nine bouncing, swaying, jarring hours with eight brief respites at each stop. She hated the thought of it, but no way to get around it presented itself, and so she endured the lively journey, doing her best to keep her balance.

Between the last stage and Clarksville, it dawned on Rebecca.

Someone needed to start laying train tracks all over the state. She'd pay twice or three times the coin to ride in the lap of luxury. Until then, sitting a coach bench beat....

Mule skinning. How long had it been...? For a bit, the phrase took her back thirty-odd years to the grand adventure along the Jefferson Trace.

"Auntie, what's tickled you? You're grinning bigger than Michael with licorice." Across from her, Francy sat the coach's bench.

"Oh, I started thinking about that first trip to take Mama's cotton to market in Jefferson. A big storm blew in. Mama was driving one wagon loaded to the gill—eight bales of cotton each if I remember right—and Daddy and I were in the other. An angry wall of black clouds headed straight toward us.

"He figured we best get to higher ground, so they both spurred the teams into a run. Almost a race." She chuckled at the scene unfolding before her mind's eye. "Once we were under this big oak with the canvas stretched out together, he told her how good she'd done, how well she'd handled the team like she'd been mule skinning for years.

"Later after they were married and we were back home, she told me upon reflection that's what turned the tide. Before that moment, she'd been staying so mad at him she couldn't even see his good qualities."

"Is that when the bear almost got you?"

"No, well yes. Same trip, but earlier." Rebecca decided she best start at the beginning, but wasn't even to the good part when the driver blew the bugle announcing the stage's arrival. On wrapping up the story, she marveled over what a wonderful, happy ending Mama had...and Daddy, too.

Perhaps, she should resign herself that she'd never have that same joyful experience.

Her boys. They would be her cheerful conclusion. Who needed more? Glancing to Heaven, she thanked God for the millionth time that the Mercy House board of directors had approved her to be their mother.

There was her miracle. Michael and Gabriel...her two angels.

As planned, she and Francy checked in and spent one night in the Donoho, then the next morning, Uncle Chester fetched her and her

niece.

From the desk clerk's reports, it seemed he'd come the morning before...just in case she'd arrived early. She loved the old man and the relationship he and Miss Jewel enjoyed.

Whoops and hollers—and even a fun little squeal from Gabe—accompanied kisses and hugs then a few tears over Francy's good news. Rose was beside herself anticipating the addition of a new grown daughter and being the mother of the groom.

Rebecca loved homecomings. Trips always reinforced how much comfort the family hearth offered.

That night while she cuddled her son, waiting for sleep to find her, she figured she'd pile days on top of each other, and then maybe...one fine morning, she'd wake and not even think about Marcus Ford's or Wallace Rusk's stubbornness.

How they'd both broken her heart in such different ways.

What a truly fine day it would be.

Hurry that day, Lord.

The fourth morning back, Rebecca woke to a hushed voice.

"Hold on to the top. Right here. See?"

A predawn jailbreak in progress! She rolled out of bed and barely caught Gabe as Michael pushed him over the baby bed's top rung.

"Mama!" Her oldest stood on his brother's blanket with his hands on his hips, wearing a rather indignant expression. "Why'd you do that?"

"He would have fallen, Michael. What were you thinking? He could have hit his head."

"No, him don't. Him hangs there until I get down and grab ahold of him."

"You two have done this before?"

"Uh...um...once. When you was gala...uh...gone."

Was the little booger trying to say she'd been gallivanting? Where'd he hear that? Or from whom? "Well, listen to me now. Don't ever do it again. Ever. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am, but we've got to hurry. I wanted to get Brother ready. Daddy's coming today!"

"Oh, Michael."

"Oh, Mama."

"Sweetheart, Mister Ford isn't coming. Remember? He stayed in San Francisco. That's very far away."

"But him is! Sarge got him unstuck in the quarter, and today is the day." He jumped up and down on his brother's mattress. The child certainly had a vivid imagination. She had to give him that. "Daddy's coming! Daddy's coming!"

Shaking her head, she perched Gabe on one hip and held her

other hand out to the bouncing boy. "Come on now, Michael. Get out of Gabe's bed and let's go downstairs."

Unwilling to douse his exuberance, she let his great anticipation pass without saying anything else about it. Didn't even correct his grammar. She'd seen his letter to Jethro and at least knew why he'd thanked his uncle that last morning he wet the bed.

Poor little guy had been reliving Big Mama's murder. Hopefully, his obsession with Marcus being his father would disseminate.

She hated it...and all the worse for his claiming the obstinate heathen would arrive that very day. But what could she do except love him?

"Is Miss Jewel up?"

"Don't know yet, on account I not go down yet. Want me to see?"

"Would you please, dear? Gabe and I will be down shortly."

She was and of course had hot coffee waiting and breakfast almost finished. Once fed, the little man insisted on keeping watch on the front porch as the sun worked its way across the wide Texas sky. He played with Indigo Blue some, but mostly, he just sat the porch's top step, staring up the road.

Poor little guy. He'd set himself up for so much disappointment.

An hour before supper, she'd had enough. The child was as stubborn as either one of her older loves, and the task of overcoming his persistence fell to her alone.

Why, he was going to make himself sick or worse. She marched out the front door, determined to convince him of the truth.

"Michael, he isn't coming. Not today. Not ever. You've got to forget about him. He isn't your Daddy."

"Is too!" He didn't look at her. "Him is my daddy, and him is coming."

If only that could be true. "No, sweetheart, he is not. Now come inside."

"No." He jumped to his feet and faced her. "He loves us! And You love him! And if he don't come, my sister can't get out of Heaven."

"Michael." She stepped toward him with her hands out, but he dodged sideways then jumped off the steps.

He looked south then froze only an instant before breaking into a run. "Daddy!"



Indigo's bark and his grandson's holler pulled Henry away from his house plans. The front door slammed. When would that boy learn?

Before he could clear the library, his oldest flew into his sanctuary without knocking. "Shoot him, Daddy!" Rebecca's hands flew up. "No. Don't! But tell him he has to leave. Do not invite him to stay. Do you hear me? He cannot stay! I can't take it! Please. Just make him go away."

Henry jumped to his feet. "Who, baby girl? Who am I supposed to shoot?"

"No one, but Marcus Ford is here! I don't know how—or why—he came, but make him leave! Please." She glanced out the window then hurried into his bedroom and slammed the door.

"Mercy, just like Michael had been saying all day." He grabbed his hat and strolled out. He stopped once, but rejected the idea of grabbing his gun. Unless Ford had gone rabid, he wouldn't need firepower to get him to leave.

He found the man holding the boy a few feet out from his porch. Indigo sat at his right leg, but immediately came beside Henry's. "Afternoon, Major."

"General." It seemed he almost saluted, but refrained. "Sir, we need to talk."



Rebecca stayed holed up in the bedroom until the front door closed then eased out to the parlor's window, careful to stay to the side of the drapes and out of sight.

Peeking from the wall side of the curtain, her eyes drank him in and sent her heart into rapping like a woodpecker. Why had he come? Nothing had changed.

No matter how much she loved him...or wanted him... she couldn't marry him.

What were they saying? Why was Daddy talking to him? How long did it take to say please leave? Had he told Marcus she didn't want to see him?

If he had, why was Michael smiling so big?

Please, Daddy, just make him go away. Give him money or a horse! Whatever the man needed to go away...forever!

Her father turned and walked toward the house. Marcus followed. Oh no! Why?

Were they coming inside? She lifted her skirt and petticoats and flew back to the library, shutting its door just as the front one opened. She raced back into her parent's bedroom, and turned the lock, trying to catch her breath.

Why did her daddy bring that...that...pagan inside?

Maybe she should shoot him.

No. She loved him and didn't want him dead. But she did want him to go somewhere else, far away. Why hadn't he stayed in California where she left him? She didn't need or want the man anywhere around her, reminding her of how much her heart ached. It wasn't fair. Or right. He shouldn't have come!

A knuckle rapped on the other side of the door she leaned against. "Rebecca? May I come in?"

"Fine!" She sashayed to the window, arms crossed over her chest, and tapped her foot. He slipped inside. "After all, it's your bedroom, Daddy. Or should I call you traitor?" She stared out the window, her eyes filled with stupid tears. Why? Why? Why?

He closed the door behind him. Was Marcus in the library? "Baby, you need to talk with him."

"No! I won't! It's bad enough with him being here!"

"He's been saved, Rebecca. Says he's a new man."

"What?" That woodpecker must have discovered a honey hole. "When?" Could it be true? "And how? Did he say?" She left the window and stepped toward her father, searching his eyes. "Are you certain he isn't just claiming salvation to get into my good graces again? Daddy, I can't take it."

"I'm convinced of it, sweetheart. Talk to him."

Her head shook of its own. "That's...well...it's wonderful news, indeed, but still..."

"Are you thinking about Wallace?"

She nodded. How could she ever face her husband again if she jumped right into a marriage with Ford so soon?

"When Charley got back to the Brigade from finding Lacey Rose, he told me something that Wallace had said on his deathbed, honey,

and I made Charley promise never to tell you. But now...you need to hear it.”

“What? Tell me then.”

“He told Charley that once he was gone, you’d finally be at liberty to love.”

She fell against his chest and wept. “Oh Daddy.”

“Wallace knew he’d worn you down...told Charley that you’d settled for him and made him the happiest man on earth.”

Pushing back, she sniffled and looked into his eyes again. “Why’d you tell Charley to keep that from me?”

“Didn’t want you blaming yourself for his stubbornness.”

“But...”

“Sweetheart, it’s very obvious you love Marcus. And I believe him when he says he loves you beyond measure.”

Her father’s words washed over her. “Did he...ask...you?”

“Yes, he did, and you have my blessing.”

Tears welled again. She kissed his cheek then pushed away.

“Where is he?”

“Waiting on the other side of the door.”

She kissed his other cheek then floated into the other room.

Marcus gawked. Her heart boomed as if the beak of the little redheaded peckerwood turned into a sledgehammer.

He knelt onto one knee.

“Marry me, beloved. You are all I want in this world. I promise—if you’ll have me—to dedicate my future to filling yours with joy.”

Michael appeared, tugging on her skirt. “Do it, Mama! Do it now! Get down there on your knees with Daddy and kiss him!”



THE END





Took Rebecca, May, Rose, Bonnie, Francy, and Charlotte all of two days to arrange the wedding. Marcus begrudged them even that.

The reception proved divine! Maybe the best Red River County had ever experienced...even counting Henry and May's! Over four hundred folks showed, but Miss Jewel and the crew she enlisted served them all and even had leftovers.

No telling what a month's notice would have brought, but the Buckmeyers' hosting reputation preceded them. The whole valley knew what great parties the family threw, and in the end, Rebecca's marriage to Marcus—and following shindig—shone second to none.

The Fords bought the Baylors' place from Levi and Rose then added on an art studio for Marcus. There, he worked on illustrating Mama May's *Red Rooster*, *the Gentleman Pirate's* books for children.

Of course, young Michael—not one bit shy—insisted on exactly how each of his grandmother's swashbucklers looked. Wouldn't do for a patch to be on the wrong eye! He helped his new daddy to choreograph each drawing as well. The boy's prophetic dreams continued off and on for the rest of his days.

Now, Bart's bachelor trip to California best be saved for another telling.



At the 2012 NETWO (North East Texas Writers' Organization) Conference, my future New York agent, Mary Sue McAdoo Seymour (may she rest in peace) loved the writing of my submission, *The Chief of Sinners*, set in the Texas Hill Country from 1929 to 1950, with Buddy Nightingale as its main character.

But it didn't fit what she was looking for.

On the way driving her back to the DFW International Airport for her trip home, she told me to write a historical Christian romance set in the 1800s and she'd sell it. I did. And so did she! To Simon and Shuster, no less.

From the airport, my husband Ron and I headed to a Taco Bueno where we brainstormed about the soon-to-be-written novel, *Vow Unbroken*.

Seeing as how the backstory for the *Chief of Sinners* had been well established, I decided to use the grandfather of Travis Buckmeyer (a major/minor character in *Chief*) as the protagonist in *Vow*. Fun!

Yet the new story/stories had to be true to *Chief* then. A small problem arose here or there, but nothing unmanageable.

At Liberty to Love is not the last offering in this family saga. *Gray Lady Down* featuring Houston, Bart, Francy and ...perhaps a cast of thousands, who knows for sure? But that story will be released in early 2017.

After that, well, I'm not certain...as the Lord leads, of course. But these folks are my dear friends now. I love them and see no reason not to continue with what the Buckmeyers, Baylors, Nightingales, and others in the clan are up to.

So what's coming next?

The Bedwarmer's Son will debut in the fall of 2016 as a companion book to these well-loved characters in my Texas Romance series. Brand new characters will have their stories told, but the novel will also introducing two *Chief* players: Buddy Nightingale, grandson of

Charley and Lacey from *Just Kin*, and a young lady from a new family named Abigail Baxter as minor actors in *The Bedwarmer's Son*.

How did this come about?

While writing a contemporary romance—as yet unfinished titled *The Pitch*—I needed several book titles, as the story revolves around authors and agents. Two happened to be *Gray Lady Down* and *The Bedwarmer's Son*. But the latter begged to be written. While it has romance aplenty, it is a bit different—as most my novels are!

I've broken many of New York's traditional rules.

The story runs two timelines: one in 1850-60s and the other in the Great Depression. Including a murder trial, it offers readers lots of other insights to the time periods, a mystery, and adventures for sure and for certain.

It's set in Dalton, Georgia, where Buddy Nightingale, Charley's grandson, is invited to hold services that turn into a protracted revival.

Keep turning pages to enjoy the first chapter of *The Bedwarmer's Son*. And be looking for Buddy and Sandy Harris' book, a triumphant tragedy, *The Chief of Sinners*, to debut in the fall of 2017.

Its companion, *Son of Promise*, is a more traditional love story that features Travis Buckmeyer and Emma Lee Harris and is planned for a Spring 2018 launch.

No end in sight! Not that I'm looking for one. I know that God isn't through with this journey He's orchestrated for me!

Blessings,
Caryl

Caryl's Other Titles & Five-Star Reviews

Historical Texas Romances



...for **Vow Unbroken**

With an intriguing plot line and well-developed characters, McAdoo, who's written nonfiction and children's fiction, delivers an engaging read for her first adult historical romance. --*Publishers Weekly*

After reading Caryl McAdoo's story of Henry and Susannah in "VOW UNBROKEN," I felt like I'd had another adventure with Tom Sawyer and Becky, this time as young adults.

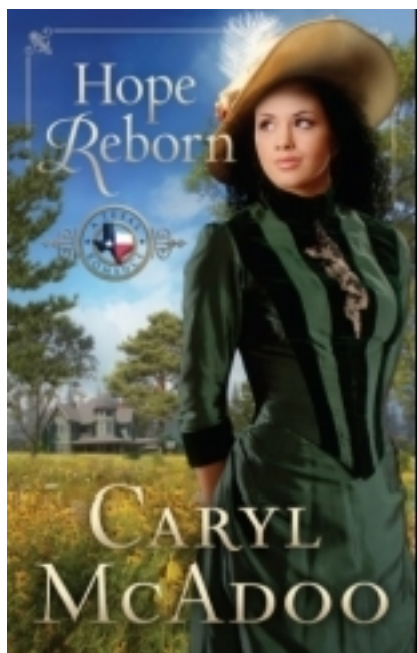
--Alan Daugherty: columnist *The News-Banner*



...for **Hearts Stolen**

Get ready for a wild, uplifting, heart-tugging, page-turning ride. *Hearts Stolen* grabbed me at the start. Sassy's feisty, fighting spirit...I couldn't set it down. Burnt dinner, but forget eating, I ate this book up. This master storyteller weaves Texas history into a well-crafted plot with unforgettable and totally loved characters.

--Holly Michael, author, *Crooked Lines*



...for **Hope Reborn**

With memorable characters, Caryl's signature humor, and plenty of adventure, drama, and romance, "Hope Reborn" is anything but fluff. A strong message of salvation runs through, but well within the storyline. Enjoyed a unique twist with May writing the stories of the previous characters – clever and fun!

--Pam Morrison, Tennessee reader



...for **Sins of the Mothers**

I tell you what, folks, this girl can write! I do love this series, and maybe most especially this book. Mary Rachel Buckmeyer can out-negotiate the experts, out-guess marketing trends, and out-stubborn a mule. Trouble is, she tends to follow her heart into disaster. The guy she marries has meandering eye, lies like a braided rug, and has all the loyalty of a new-born pup. Mary hops from one frying pan to another until one man shows up who could steady her and get her out of the fixes she gets herself into. Such a great story! I know you'll love.

--Anne Baxter Campbell, author *The Truth Trilogy: The Roman's Quest*, *Marcus Varitor, Centurion*, and *The Truth Doesn't Die*



...for **Daughters of the Heart**

A fun packed Christian romance novel with plenty of action, heartbreak, tears, deception, twists, and turns. [The three sisters] made a pact never to break their father's heart, but when suitors show up, it's hard for them to stay determined. Will they find true love? Will Dad accept a suitor for them and give his blessings?

--Joy Gibson, a Tennessee reader and

pastor's wife



...for **Just Kin**

I have followed this historical romance series from the beginning and they just keep getting better. Lacey Rose loves Charley and is devastated when he leaves to fight for Texas with the Confederate army. Charley doesn't realize Lacey Rose is in love with him but is both surprised and pleased with the goodbye kiss she gives him. After Charley sends a hurtful letter trying to discourage her from waiting for him, Lacey Rose runs away and ends up in all kinds of trouble. Charley also stirs up some trouble of his own when he begins looking for her. Don't miss out on this book. I loved it!

--Louise Koiner, Texas beta reader

Contemporary Red River Romances



...for ***The Preacher's Faith***

This was my first book to read by Caryl McAdoo and I absolutely loved it. I will be reading more. I love the way she prays that her story gives God Glory and dedicates The Preacher's Faith to Him and His Kingdom...a good clean book to read. I was drawn into this story right from the start. I loved this book and can't wait for book two.

--Elizabeth 'Liz' Dent, Alabama reader



...for ***Sing a New Song***

Sing a New Song is a delightful breath of air. Caryl eloquently brings her audience nearer to God [with] fresh ways of viewing Christian life and all it offers. The characters are loveable and

humorous. Illuminating, the story shares the Gospel beautifully. Samuel's sermons as well as the gorgeous lyrics of Mary Esther's songs fill our hearts with newfound worship. Truly an inspiring tale. Christian fiction in its best; a romantic love story that brings its readers closer to God. A treasure for sure.

--Christine Barber, author of *Broken to Pieces*



...for *One and Done*

Faster than a major league outfielder pulling down a popup fly ball, this romance is guaranteed to snag baseball lovers and romance readers alike. The Christian story is written with wit, verve and Caryl's usual flare for dialect and spicy dialogue. Be warned. Those readers searching for a saccharine, man-meets-woman story will soon discover this is no sanitized romantic fairy tale. From the beginning, the reader will identify with real people who live clearly in the mind, so much so, that a person can almost smell locker room sweat or the mouthwatering scent of spicy Mexican food. Identification with the hero and heroine is nearly immediate. With so much to rave about, this reviewer cannot begin to cover all the delightful surprises, so the reader simply must buy "One and Done" to see for themselves.

—Cass Wessel, multi-published devotion author

Contemporary Apple Orchard Romance



...for *Lady Luck's a Loser*

A very unique, witty plot. I couldn't put it down. I love that my favorite characters are still active at the end of the book, only their relationships have changed. What a way for Dub to fulfill his promises to his deceased wife. Love, trust, forgiveness, and many emotions make for a well written book.

--Joy Gibson, Tennessee reader

The Generations Biblical fiction

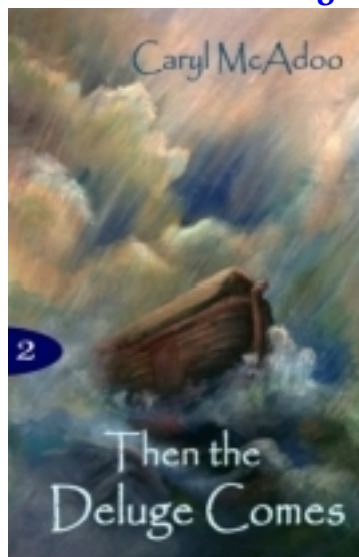
...for *A Little Lower Than the Angels*



Caryl McAdoo used her research and knowledge of biblical scripture combined with an incredible imagination as a foundation to fill in the gaps of the story of Adam and Eve and their children. I was caught up in the story from page one to the ending. I particularly appreciated the "Search the Scriptures" section at the end which explains some of the Biblical clues for this work of fiction. I loved it and highly recommend it.

--Judy Levine, reader, Arizona

...for [Then the Deluge Comes](#)



Deluge is the second book in The Generations Series, and if the books

still to follow are as good as this one and the first one in the series are it is going to be an incredible series. The author has a way of breathing life and emotions into the characters that made me feel like I was on the sidelines watching their stories unfold. This is some of the best Biblical fiction that I have read and I look forward to the rest of the series. I was furnished with an e-copy of the book in return for an honest review.

--Ann Ellis, reader, Texas



...for Replenish the Earth

Caryl tells the story of the flood in such a unique way.. I like how she makes the characters so real. This Bible story just comes to life. Noah's family on the Ark taking care of the animals and then when they come to a stop, starting all over on a barren earth. I found that the family conversations, their actions and the descriptions just made this more real to me. I like that Caryl gives scripture references and her thoughts at the end of the book

--Deanna Stevens, reader, Nebraska

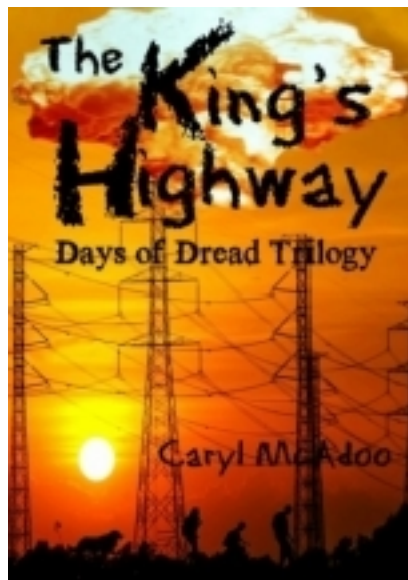


...for **Children of Eber**

So much of the tale remains faithful to the Scriptural account, but where there is silence, Caryl's author voice sings through in delicious detail. For the reader familiar with the Biblical account, she fleshes out a mere paragraph or two until the narrative vibrates with life. As if transported through a time machine, the reader reenters the world of the Ancients experiencing their lives and seeing their surroundings afresh. Those who know the Biblical account will delight in following the ancient pair into Egypt, then back to Canaan again.

--Cass Wessel, multi-published devotional author

Mid-Grade that Grandparents love



...**The King's Highway**

I can't remember when I have enjoyed reading a book as much as this one. If I really like a book, I can read it in a day. I read this twice in two days. I couldn't quit reading. It has to be right up there with my all-time favorites. If anyone thinks they won't read it because it's for mid-grade, I encourage you to reconsider. You'll miss a blessing. Anyone reading age from the mid grades to senior citizens (that's me) will love this book. The characters in the book are delightful.

--Louise Koiner, reader, Texas

Non-Fiction



...for **Story & Style, The Craft of Writing Creative Fiction**

This is a wonderful book for those wanting to learn more about writing. I know from experience. The content helped me tremendously!! It especially helped me gain a clear picture of POV and the use of action versus attribution to strengthen my writing and make my debut book the best it can be. Thank you, Caryl, your continued helping hands are a blessing to many of us rookie writers!!

--Andy Skrzynski, author of *The New World, A Step Backward*

So, Coming Soon...

...Companion stories to the Texas Romance series

The Bedwarmer's Son 1857 & 1928

The Son of Promise 1951

The Chief of Sinners, 1929-1950

...Texas Romances

Gray Lady Down 1867-18??

The Chief of Sinners, 1929-1950

...in the Days of Dread Trilogy *Mid-grade and Young Adult, but Grandparents love them, too!*

The Sixth Trumpet

Compelled by a vision, Jackson Allison leaves the safety of Red River County on a quest to free his mother from the clutches of a traitorous double agent. Accompanied by Albert Einstein Hawking, his personal nerd, and the Great Pyrenees guardian, Boggs, the high school freshman must elude Communist patrols, slavers, and bangers. With all of North America thrown back to the nineteenth century by the loss of all things electronic, the King's Highway offers an alternate corridor to pass on foot through the chaotic new-norm. He reaches the lawless DFW Metroplex determined to reunite his family.

The Kidron Valley

By day, Jackson Allison fights alongside his grandfather, uncles, and other red-neck defenders of the cattle and grain rich Red River County. Plagued by dreams of his dad by night, he somehow joins his father's Marine unit that's fighting the last great battle between good and evil in the Kidron Valley. It seems so real, but how can it be? In Northeast Texas, the good guys gain ground adding four neighboring counties to their protected, safe area. However, in the Middle East, the greatly outnumbered elect daily loose ground and are pushed farther and father south, until it seems all is lost.

The Texas Romance Family Sagas

Book #1 *VOW UNBROKEN*, 1832

Book #2 *HEARTS STOLEN*, 1839-1844

Book #3 *HOPE REBORN*, 1850-1851

Book #4 *SINS OF THE MOTHERS*, 1851-1852

Book #5 *DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART*, 1853-1854

Book #6 *JUST KIN*, 1861-1865

Book #7 *AT LIBERTY TO LOVE* 1865-1866

Additional titles planned either in this series or as companion books to the series:

THE BEDWARMER'S SON 1857 & 1928- (parallel stories)

Book # 8 *GRAY LADY DOWN* 1867-??

THE CHIEF OF SINNERS 1926-1950

SON OF PROMISE 1955

Characters...alphabetically

Warning! Reader beware! Spoiler warning!

If you aren't up to date on reading the series, you might find facts you'd rather wait to know.

The Bayers

1823 – Andrew, married Susannah Abbott in 1822, and brother Jacob are killed in a logging accident, leaving five-year-old Levi Baylor an orphan. Aunt Sue rears him, and later that year, delivers daughter Rebecca Baylor who never knew her daddy.

~ **Baylor, LEVI Bartholomew** – born November 2, 1817 orphaned at age five; was reared by Aunt Sue Baylor until fourteen, then Uncle Henry Buckmeyer, too, after he married Aunt Sue. Levi became husband to Rosaleen ‘Sassy’ or ‘Rose’ Fogelsong Nightingale Baylor and step-father to Charley Nightingale and Bart Baylor (Comanche Chief Bold Eagle’s blood son); then Pa to Stephen Austin, Daniel Boone, Wallace Rusk, and Rachel Rose.

HIS TITLE: HEARTS STOLEN

On Scene in: VOW UNBROKEN, HOPE REBORN, and JUST KIN

Mention in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE, and mentioned in contemporary Red River Romance SING A NEW SONG



~ Baylor, Rosaleen 'ROSE' (SASSY) Summer Fogelsong Nightingale – born August 24, 1823, married at fifteen in the fall of '38 to Charles Nightingale, then stolen by the Comanche in the summer of '39. She lived with the tribe five years as the captive third wife of the chief—birthing Nightingale's son in February, 1840—until being rescued in October of 1844 by the Texas Rangers. She married Levi mid-December of that same year. She gave birth to Bartholomew, the Comanche chief's blood son in 1845, followed by Stephen Austin in April, 1846, Daniel Boone in '49, and Wallace Rusk in '53. She finally had a baby girl, Rachel Rose.

HER TITLE: HEARTS STOLEN

On Scene in: HOPE REBORN, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

Mention in: VOW UNBROKEN, SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ Baylor, Bartholomew 'BART' – born July 20, 1845 to Rose and Levi, but blood son of Comanche chief Bold Eagle

On Scene in: HOPE REBORN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, and JUST KIN

Mention in: HEARTS STOLEN

~ **Briggs, Clayton ‘CLAY’ Butterfield** – born October 13, 1827 to J.T. and Maud Briggs. He courts and marries Gwendolyn Buckmeyer.
HIS TITLE: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ Briggs, Jake – born in 1812 to J.T and Maud, married to Clover, father of Jedidiah

On Scene in: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ Briggs, Jasper – born in 1837 to J.T. and Maud, marries Bonnie Claire Buckmeyer in 1866

On Scene in: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Briggs, Jedidiah – born in October 1845 to Jake and Clover

On Scene in: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN

~ Boyd, Francine ‘FRANCY’ – born October 28, 1842, a California orphan God sends to Jethro to take to Mary Rachel. She quickly becomes a part of the family.

On Scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHER, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

The Buckmeyers

1832 – Sue meets and marries Henry Buckmeyer.

1833-1844 – Sue gives Henry four daughters, Mary Rachel, Gwendolyn Belle, Cecelia Carol, and Bonnie Claire, and a son, Samuel Houston, then leaves him a widower.

1850 – Henry marries May Meriwether.

1851-1854 – May gives Henry a son, David Crockett, and a daughter, Meri Charlotte.

~ **Buckmeyer, BONNIE Claire** – born December 2, 1840. Henry and Sue’s fourth child.

HER TITLE: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, and JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

Mention in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS

~ **Buckmeyer, CECELIA Carol ‘CeCe’** – born April 10, 1836. Henry and Sue’s third child. Marries Elijah Eversole in 1854.

HER TITLE: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, and JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE



Mention in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS

~ **Buckmeyer, David Crockett** – born October 4, 1851
firstborn of Henry and May.

On Scene in: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN

~ **Buckmeyer, GWENDOLYN Belle or 'Gwen'** – born Nov. 29, 1834.
Henry and Sue's second child. Marries Clay Briggs in 1854.

HER TITLE: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, and JUST KIN, AT
LIBERTY TO LOVE

Mention in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS

~ **Buckmeyer, Millicent MAY Meriwether** born August 23, 1808 to
the Commodore and her mother. A successful New York dime novelist,
May heads to Texas to interview a couple of Texas Rangers for new
inspiration after seeing a newspaper article about Levi Baylor and
Wallace Rusk. She marries Henry Buckmeyer there and gives birth to

David Crockett in 1851 and Charlotte in 1854. MayMee to her grandsugars.

HER TITLE: HOPE REBORN //

On Scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Buckmeyer, Meri 'CHARLOTTE' born in 1854 to Henry and May.

On Scene in: JUST KIN

~ **Buckmeyer, Patrick HENRY** - born March 6, 1798; killed a man at fifteen, fought in the Battle of New Orleans at sixteen. At thirty-four, he married Susannah 'Sue' Baylor in 1832, and became stepfather to her Rebecca—also honorary pa to Levi Baylor—and daddy to Mary Rachel, Gwendolyn Belle, Cecelia Carol, and Bonnie Claire before becoming a widower in Dec '44 at his son Houston's birth. Finding love again, he married May Meriwether in 1850 and fathered Crockett and Charlotte. He's Grandpa to a slew of grandsugars with many more to come!

HIS TITLE: VOW UNBROKEN, HOPE REBORN

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ **Buckmeyer, Sam HOUSTON** – born December 11, 1844. Henry and Sue's fifth child, first son. His mother passes at his birth, so he was motherless until six years old when his pa married May.

On Scene in: HOPE REBORN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

Mention in: HEARTS STOLEN, SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ **Buckmeyer, Susannah 'SUE' Alicia Abbott Baylor** – born May 15, 1803, married Andrew Baylor at eighteen in 1821, widowed at nineteen and became guardian aunt to orphaned Levi Baylor, birthed Rebecca in the next year. At twenty-nine, she married Henry Buckmeyer in 1832. Mother to Mary Rachel, Gwendolyn, Cecelia, Bonnie Claire, and Samuel Houston.

HER TITLE: VOW UNBROKEN

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN

Mention in: HOPE REBORN, SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Dempsey, Frederica 'FREDDIE' May's publisher who Charley turns to for help in New York City on his search for Lacey Rose. She has a

widowed daughter, Marah O'Connor

~ **Eversole, ELIJAH** – born January 2, 1826, moved to California in the gold rush days where his parents abandoned him as a teen. He followed in his father's blacksmith trade and loves inventing and building new helpful machines. Jethro Risen and Moses Jones make him a partner in a gold mine. He marries Cecelia Buckmeyer in 1854.

HIS TITLE: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

On Scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ **Ford, Gabriel** – exact day of birth unknown, about five months old in November 1865. He and brother Michael were adopted by Rebecca Rusk then by her husband Marcus Ford.

On Scene in: AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Ford, Julia and Michele, Marcus' first wife and daughter, died on the yellow fever epidemic in New Orleans

Mention in: AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ **Ford, MARCUS Aurelius**, Major in the Civil War with Levi Baylor and Wallace Rusk under General Buckmeyer. Lost his first wife Julia and baby Michele to yellow fever epidemic in New Orleans. Meets the Widow Rusk in 1865 while traveling. Marries her in 1866 and adopts her two adopted sons, becoming father to Michael and Gabriel Ford.

HIS TITLE: AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ **Ford, MICHAEL** - exact day of birth unknown, about four years old in November 1865. He and brother Gabriel were adopted by Rebecca Rusk then by her husband Marcus Ford.

On Scene in: AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ **Ford, REBECCA Ruth Baylor Rusk** – born June 12, 1823; Sue's daughter by 1st husband Andrew (who died before Rebecca's birth). The nine-year-old on the Jefferson Trace in 1832 (book 1) turns twenty-one in 1844 (book 2) before finally meeting Wallace Rusk. Marries him at age twenty-seven in 1850, then is widowed in 1864. Adopted two boys, Michael and Gabriel in 1866 then married Marcus Ford when she's forty-two.

HER TITLE: AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

On Scene in: VOW UNBROKEN, HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN

Mention in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ Jeffcoat, CLAUDIA, a wealthy married woman and avid reader of dime romances who befriended and helped Charley on his search for Lacey Rose. Pauleen Shriver's sister.

Mention in: JUST KIN

~ Jones, LANELLE Wheeler – born February 26, 1831, Caleb's cousin, John's sister, marries Moses Jones in early fall 1851.

On scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS

~ Jones, MOSES – born October 13, 1816, a Scot partnered with Jethro Risen in a gold mine, marries Lanelle Wheeler in 1854.

On scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS

Mention in: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Jones, 'JOSH'ua Jethro, also 'JONESY' – born January 19, 1852 to Moses and Lanelle, but the blood son of Caleb Wheeler

~ **Meriwether, CHESTER** born a slave on October 7, 1803 to Commodore Meriwether's field hands Silas and Honey Pie. He was 5, about to be 6, when his half-sister Millicent May was born. He marries JEWEL (formerly Mammy, the Buckmeyers' cook) in 1851.

On Scene in: HOPE REBORN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

Mention in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ **Meriwether, JEWEL (formerly Mammy) Rozier** the Buckmeyers' cook after Henry rescued her and her son Jean Paul Rozier who also works for the Buckmeyers.

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

Mention in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Meriwether, Silas born a slave in 1808 on the Meriwethers' Sea Side plantation, father of Chester and also blood father of May

Mention in: HOPE REBORN

~ **Nightingale, CHARLES Nathaniel, Senior** - born 1805, married Rosaleen Fogelsong and fathered Charley, though was never around him. Lives in St. Louis with his first wife and two daughters.

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN

~ **Nightingale, Charles 'CHARLEY' Nathaniel** - born son to a Comanche chief Feb 27 '40 to the captive third wife Rosaleen, but Charles Nightingale was his mother's husband and Charley's blood father. He's rescued in 1844 with his mother by Texas Rangers Levi Baylor and Wallace Rusk. He killed a man at ten when Comancheros came to steal him and his mother to return them to Bold Eagle. He marries Lacey Rose Langley in November, 1865.

HIS TITLE: JUST KIN

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN

Mention in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART,
AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ **Nightingale, LACEY Rose Langley** born November 16, 1844 in Nacogdoches to Laura, only fourteen when Lacey's father, a Comanche brave, had captured her. Lacey marries Charley in November, 1865

HER TITLE: JUST KIN

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN

~ O'Connor, Curry CYLE, Junior Marah' fourteen year old son

Mention in: JUST KIN

~ O'Connor, CURRY Cyle, Senior Marah's dead husband

Mention in: JUST KIN

~ O'Connor, MARAH A beautiful older woman (twenty-nine) who almost wins Charley's heart. She breeds thoroughbreds in Conneticut and is the daughter of Freddie – May's publisher who helped Charley in New York

~ **Risen, JETHRO** – born September 22, 1830 partner of Moses Jones in a gold mine. Married Mary Rachel Buckmeyer Wheeler in 1853 and later that year, reconnected with his estranged father, Boaz. Founds the Mercy House Orphanage and Miners' Bank in San Francisco.

HIS TITLE: SINS OF THE MOTHERS

On Scene in: AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

Mention in: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ **Risen, MARY RACHEL Buckmeyer Wheeler** – born August 3, 1833. Henry and Sue's firstborn eloped with Caleb Wheeler in 1951 without Daddy's blessing and moved to San Francisco where she took over the renamed Lone Star Mercantile. Her husband soon murdered, she becomes the widowed mother of Susannah "SUSIE" Wheeler. Remarries Jethro Risen in 1853, adopted an orphan, Francine "FRANCY" and birthed baby girl Rebecca "BECCA" in April, 1853 (blood daughter of Clinton) and Boaz Reuel, Jethro's firstborn son, in December, 1854.

HER TITLE: SINS OF THE MOTHERS

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Rozier, JEAN PAUL son of the Buckmeyer's cook, Mammy or later,

Jewel. He and his mother were freed by their former owner when he died and both went to work for Henry. Her in the kitchen, him supervising the cotton fields. He marries Laura Langley, another soul Henry took in.

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, JUST KIN

Mention in: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ **Rozier, LAURA Langley** was rescued at fifteen in 1844 along with Sassy. Pregnant at the time, she delivered the next month—a baby girl, Lacey Rose on the way to the Buckmeyers’ for Thanksgiving that same year. She stays on there as teacher and marries Jean Paul Rozier.

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, JUST KIN

Mention in: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ **Rusk, WALLACE** – born August 15, 1819, a sixteen-year-old orphan picked up by Henry Buckmeyer and young Levi Baylor on the way to the Battle of San Jacinto, served with Levi Texas Rangering, fell in love with his sister Rebecca sight-unseen, and after six years of proposing, finally wears her down and marries her in 1850. He is wounded in the Civil War and dies from stubbornness, not allowing his leg to be amputated. No children, but Lacey Rose Langley Nightingale was named after him.

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, JUST KIN

Mention in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Shriver, PAULEEN a Wealthy married woman and avid reader of dime romances who befriended Charley on his search for Lacey Rose

Mention in: JUST KIN

~ Wheeler, Caleb – born August 29, 1828, cousin to John and Lanelle, partners in the Mercantile in San Francisco after eloping with Mary Rachel Buckmeyer in 1851, father of Susannah.

On Scene in: HOPE REBORN, SINS OF THE MOTHER

~ Wheeler, John – born April 17, 1825, Lanelle’s brother, Caleb’s cousin, partner in San Francisco Mercantile.

On Scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHER

~ **Wheeler, Susannah “SUSIE”** – born October, 1851 in San Francisco to Mary Rachel (father Caleb deceased)

On Scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS

And now, without further ado...

The Bedwarmer's Son

A sampling...



“He sold us right before he married that fancy lady from England then bought us back the next spring.”

Will placed his hand on his grandfather's arm. “Aww, Pappy, no need to go that far back. Miss Parmele didn't come all this way to hear our family history.”

The old man leaned back and stared across the metal table at the woman then glanced at him. “If I don't start at the beginning, then how's Missy here going to know why that cracker had to die?”

Stepping around the table, he bent close to his Pappy's ear and hunted for the balance between loud enough for the old ears and soft enough that his words wouldn't leave the cell. “Pappy, please. Don't use that word. You know full well the guards are all white.”

“So? I'm half white. And you—you're so pale skinned iff'n'

everyone in six counties didn't know you and I was kin, you could pass for a snow bunny." Pappy grinned at the lady lawyer. "Anyways, you tell me, ma'am. Want to hear the whole truth or my grandson's shorter version?"

"No, sir, I want to hear it all." You start wherever you need to."

"Isn't that something? Gettin' called sir by a pretty white gal; a smart lawyer to boot all wrapped in one nice package." He grinned at her. "Well then, she was named after a beautiful, fragrant flower." He closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath.



The wagon hit a rut and knocked Jasmine off her seat. The heavy manacle bit into her wrists. She hated chains, hated the leather strap around her ankle just as much, hated it all to blue blazes.

"Uncle Tom, iffin' I promise not to run, could ya unlock me?"

The old man snickered. "I sure enough ain't ya uncle, gal. An' my name be Thomas, not Tom. You smart as you think you is, best be learnin' ya'self some manners. Two more creeks and ussin' be home. I tell ya true, little gal, run this time...it be more than a whippin' and gettin' sold ya be in for."

A whipping? Jasmine would not call what she got a whipping, more like being beat half to death. But still, she'd almost made it. Best week ever, seven whole days of being free.

Didn't matter what they did. She'd run again, first chance. Being someone's nigger wasn't no life. Be better off dead than a slave.

A pungent aroma like lye soap mixed with a sweet rose-tinted toilet water rode on the breeze. She'd 'bout decided it blew off from the man. He didn't smell of foul body odor like most. She studied him.

Wasn't really that old either, but the spunk had been beat out of him. His slump showed nothing but submission. Still, she had to ask. "You ever run, Thomas?"

"No, ma'am, ain't never. Not even when I's young. No siree, too smart for that." He glanced over and grinned. "Now some sweet day, I's be free for sure. Maybe not on this side." He gazed ahead as though seeing more than the dusty road. "The Good Book says be happy. Slave or free, rich or poor. And if you is a slave, be a good'un."

"I'll never be happy long as I'm owned by nobody. Ner good either. Why would I? What do ya get but another beating or being sold?"

"Oh, gal, my reward 'll be just like poor old Lazarus'. He had it way worse 'n me till the angels come and carried him right straight to old Abraham's bosoms. And that rich man? Sho, he had it great here

on this ol' earth, but –"

"I don't know no Lazarus."

The old man laughed. "All he wanted in the end was what old Lazarus had, but he couldn't even get one drop of water to cool his tongue."

"Why do you believe all that nonsense? That's nothing but white man's religion."

"No, ma'am. Jesus weren't white." The old man held his hand out. "Hush now, child. I's hear a rider coming up. Mind your manners now, ya hear? Ain't got need for no smart mouth gal causing me troubles."

She sat up straight and smoothed out her ruffled dress. She heard the stranger approaching, too, galloping toward the wagon from behind. One more poor white man looking to collect a mite of dirty money for returning a couple of escaping slaves to their master.

"Hey, boy! Hold up! Right there." The man reined his bay to a hard stop next to Thomas.

A body stench and the foul odor of his poor horse's lather assaulted her nose. Neither one ain't had no bath in his whole life from the stink on them.

"Where you headed, boy? And who's this little gal you got?"

Like Thomas knew his place and was happy to go there, he lowered his chin practically to his chest as if studying on the mule's rump and pulled his paper from his inside pocket. He held it out without looking at the man.

"Old Tom here, suh. Done been to my Mistress June's cousin's place over yonder by Catfish Creek to fetch this gal here, suh. She to be the massuh's new bedwarmer."

What? Jasmine couldn't believe her ears. She wasn't no one's bedwarmer.

Why, she'd be picking the man she jumped the broom with her own self, Mama done told her. And it sure wouldn't be some old stinking sickly white man needing a hot body to keep him from freezing of a night. No, sir, she never be no bedwarmer.

The rider flung the paper back at her driver then spurred his mount without wasting another word. Amidst his stinking dust, the piece of white fluttered just out of Old Tom's reach, and she grabbed it. He stuck his hand out, but she turned sideways, blocking him.

"Says here you are one fine old nigger slave." She moved her finger along the line of words. "And that you have permission to be on the road driving this wagon anywhere you thinks you need to."

"Go to hell's fires for lying, gal. It don't say that."

"How you know nothin'? You cain' t read."

"I know what the paper say."

"Do not, not for sure. How could you? It's agin their law."

"I know on account Mis'ess done told me."

"She coulda lied."

He shook his head and put some steel in his voice. "Don't you nevermind, young miss. Now give it here.."

She bumped him hard. "Well, you mind this, Mister high and mighty Thomas. I ain't warming nobody's bed. Ain't never no man been under my covers, not ever, not once, and I ain't jumping into your master's four poster, and that's a fact. So you might as well untie me and take off these chains."

For the longest, the old man didn't say a word, then short of the next creek, he looked over. "I's gots me a fine wife, and three good strong boys, and a pretty little gal jes 'bout your age. And well... I's sorry, Miss Jasmine, but I cain't unlock ya."

"Could iffin' ya wanted to."

One of the wagon wheels dipped and threw her off balance. She fell hard against Thomas, pushing him near off the bench. In that instant, she spied that note folded in his coat pocket, and without thinking twice on it, slipped it out and tucked it under her waistband.

Might just come in handy one free day.

"That man just now—or one like him—be catching you 'fore morning were you to take off. Even if they didn't bring ya back for the reward, they'd –"

"Don't you be worrying over me none, Ol' Tom. I can take care of my own self."

He shrugged. "Good Lord'll work it out. I's be praying for you anyhow, Missy."

She pouted and looked away. Didn't matter. She'd slit her new master's throat, and either she'd get away, or she'd be dead.

With each clop of the mule's hooves, her heart hardened. If the old man say true words, and another life really did wait to be had, must be better than this one. She closed her eyes. The horrible image that had haunted her for so long hung right before her mind's eye again. Her mother's screams ringing in her ears as they dragged her away.

Why couldn't she see her mam's face?

The dark curls she'd loved to twist around her finger flew wild as the trader pulled her mama toward his wagon. Mud soiled her skirt and petticoats. Her mother's mistress be screamin' almost much as Mam.

Never thought her mam be sold. Miss Beatrice loved her, said so many times. Hurt Jasmine's heart to the bone, and she tried to join in the ruckus herself, but her throat wouldn't let no noise through.

Poor Mam set such store in being clean as new-fallen snow, loved being spotless.

But that white devil pulled her through that muddy yard in front of the big house like an old tow sack full of taters. He didn't care how dirty she got. Not one bit. Miss Beatrice ran off her porch and hit old Satan in the back with her fist, but the master dragged her off him.

Kept saying it were all her fault, but clear enough she never want to sell Mama. Jasmine wished she could see her mother's face. Just one more time.

"We be here. This ya new home, gal. Sure do hope you gots 'nough smarts in that pretty head to stick where ya put."

She shook off that horrible day three summers ago.

Home? This patch of ground would never be her home, not ever. Her home was up North somewhere. Would she ever see such a place? Live a life where a man didn't own another man? Live in a land where there weren't no slaves ner masters?

The big house looked much like the one she'd just come from.

Six big columns climbed from the ground all the way up to the roof out front, but this one wore a difference. New paint maybe? Or could be the beautiful greenery and flowers everywhere? She breathed deep. Even the air smelled different.

And she did like the trees on both sides of the lane that guarded the front of the big house.

Give her more cover when she ran.

Over off to one side of the narrow, shaded road, a gang of darkies hoed the ram rod straight rows of cotton. She hated working the lint, chopping, picking, and cranking that gin.

Wasn't nothing she liked about them prickly white balls. She kissed her fingertips like she just come in from working the field.

On the other side, way over near a big oak, a white man sat on a stone bench all hunched over in a little garden, staring at something right in front of him.

Whatever it were, sure interested him. He didn't even look up to judge the value of his newest possession, his latest bought piece of property—her!

Crazy old colorless goat. She hated him without ever meeting. Him a man, thinks he can own her, thinks he can order her to slip beneath his covers to keep his pallid old flesh warm. She wouldn't be anyone's slave for long and especially not that old fool's.

Tom drove the wagon around the house to the back. Almost like the same man built this place and the one she'd just come from.

The barn sat closer to the big house's back porch than she'd ever want cows and pigs and chickens to live were it her own. Jasmine often daydreamed about owning her own big fancy home, being free to come and go as she pleased, walk through town with her chin high.

Then, just past the animals' big ol' house, a row of shacks where

the slaves got to lay it down for a few hours every night. Two old ladies sat on chairs under a shake-shingle porch roof that jutted out in front of one of the middle shacks shelling peas.

For sure no fancy board porch for them old grannies.

A half dozen pickaninnies played in the dirt not far from them. Yes, sir, white Christian folks loved breeding slaves, almost as much as they liked breeding hogs or buying and selling their stock, swine or niggers.

One of the little one ran through the yard birds scattering ‘em. The golden and red rooster whirled. He stood tall and flapped his wings at his tormentor then crowed like he were king of it all and just conquered the intruder.

“There you are, Thomas. Have a good trip?” A grand, fancy white lady—prob’ly the master’s mis’ess—stood on the back porch, her hands on her hips. But she didn’t seem quite so haughty as most. Her shoulders slumped a bit, and a sadness tinged her eyes.

The old man pulled the brake tight. “Yes, ma’am, Miss June. Just likes ya say, day there and one back. We left out first light, and here we is home all safe and sound.” He wrapped the reins around the brake handle.

Miss June strolled down the steps, eyeing Jasmine. “Any problems?”

“No, ma’am. Oh, one of them bounty hunters stopped us, but I showed him ya note, and it sent him on his way.” He flashed the lady a big smile and untied the leather strap that held Jasmine to the wagon’s seat post.

“How about the girl? She give you any problems?”

“No, ma’am, not one bit. She a good one, Miss June.”

The old gray headed woman held out her hand, offering it. Jasmine resisted the urge not to take it, and instead, let the lady help her down.

“What’s your name, girl?”

“Jasmine.”

“Hey, girl, you say ma’am iff’n you speaking to Miss June there, ya hear Thomas now?”

She ducked her chin and studied on her dirty bare feet. “Sorry, ma’am. I done forgot my manners.”

“How old are you, child?”

“Don’t know for sure, ma’am. Fifteen maybe.”

Miss June fluffed Jasmine’s hair then patted her cheek. “You are just as pretty as Cousin Alma claimed.” The woman nodded toward the house. “Get on inside, the both of you. Mammy saved some corn dodgers and fat back, and she’s got bath water heating for you, Jasmine.”

Her breath caught. A hot bath in the big house? She closed her eyes and relished the imagined feel of the warm water washing over her skin, carrying all the dirt away, soaking her tired bones in the luxurious heat. How long had it been since she'd had herself a hot bath? More than three years to be sure 'cause her mother drew her last.

Then her imaginations all went lukewarm. Miss June must like her husband's bed warmers clean.

*Be watching for the debut of The Bedwarmer's
Son in September, 2016*

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BookBub <https://www.bookbub.com/authors/caryl-mcadood>

Simon & Schuster <http://tinyurl.com/S-SCarylsPage>

Email ComeVisit@CarylMcadood.com

Praying my story gives God glory! □ Blessings, Caryl

Author reaching out to you!

Hey dear Reader!

Where would I be if not for you?

My career is blooming thanks to the Lord and YOU! I always pray my story gives God glory and hope you enjoy everyone! My desire is that each novel brings you closer to Him and gives you issues to ponder, asking for God's perspective.

There are so many new ways to help me spread the word of these

Kingdom books! First, if you want to stay on top of all my book news (debuts, sales, awards), please [subscribe *The Caryler*](#), my quarterly newsletter. I try to make it fun with a Scripture and lyric of the day.

And speaking of lyrics, God gives me new songs! There's nothing I'd rather do than praise and worship Him in song which lends to being called the Singing Pray-er. Now you can hear them! Listen at my [YouTube](#) channel! And please subscribe while you're there, so you won't miss any new songs!

If you enjoy my story, it'll be a big ol' boon if you'll take the time to review it at Amazon, Goodreads, your blog, and anywhere you enjoy reading about books. And click "Follow" under my picture while you're there. ☐ Of course, tell your friends, too. Word of mouth is invaluable!

I love visiting with my readers, and have a group of special readers who help me spread the word when I have a new release. Let me know if you'd like to be a part of the Christian eVALUaters, my review crew and supporters.

Stop by my Facebook page, too! Just search Caryl McAdoo. And last but not never least, I pray that God will bless you as you have blessed me, that He will give you favor in everything you do!

Love in Christ and many blessings,

Caryl

A few links Others might find helpful:



Needing any help with your online presence? Go to [Rocksteady Resolutions](#) for help with websites, email lists, and all social media outlets. CEO Janis McAdoo (yes, my daughter-in-love) will be the best virtual assistant you could ever have. She is knowledgeable, energetic, full to the brim of integrity, and I promise, will be a God-sent blessing to you!

Three Facebook groups:

[Christian Indie Books](#) is a great place to find great books from new authors who post new releases, special sales, and sometimes, even free books!

[Christian Indie Authors Readers Group](#) is a great place to visit to meet new authors who post deals and often even free books!

[5-Star Reviews of Christian Fiction](#): Find out all the favorites of readers such as yourself here, and feel free to join and post your own reviews of books you love and rank with FIVE STARS!

Blogs:

[Heart“wings” Blog](#) with wonderful daily devotionals that amazingly seem to be exactly what readers need to hear that very day!

[Faith, Friends...and Chocolate](#)

[Stitches Thru Time](#)